

# 180 YEARS OF INDIANS IN GUYANA (1838-2018)



Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh with family and friends at their home, "Ayodhya," at 273 Lamaha Street (purchased in 1923), North Cummingsburg, Georgetown, British Guiana (Guyana), circa. 1928. From left to right: (standing) Pratap Narine, "Tappie," their fourth child and third son; Indal, JB's youngest brother; Pitamber Doobay, JB's closest friend and confidante; Mrs. Singh; and Victor Ramsaran; (sitting, back row) young lady (name unknown) and Efreda Chandrawati, "Moon," eldest daughter; (sitting, front row) young lady (name unknown) and Gangadai, "Nelly," JB's only sister. The copyrighted pictures of Alice Singh were provided by Karna Singh and were taken from the 'Heritage Collection of Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh'.

Courtesy: Dr. Baytoram Ramharack

Edited by

Somdat Mahabir & Ramesh Gampat

# 180 YEARS OF INDIANS IN GUYANA (1838-2018)

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**Somdat Mahabir & Ramesh Gampat**

**Caribbean Hindu Network (CHN)**

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## **Cover picture**

Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh with family and friends at their home, "Ayodhya," at 273 Lamaha Street (purchased in 1923), North Cummingsburg, Georgetown, British Guiana (Guyana), circa. 1928. From left to right: (standing) Pratap Narine, "Tappie," their fourth child and third son; Indal, JB's youngest brother; Pitamber Doobay, JB's closest friend and confidante; Mrs. Singh; and Victor Ramsaran; (sitting, back row) young lady (name unknown) and Efreda Chandrawati, "Moon," eldest daughter; (sitting, front row) young lady (name unknown) and Gangadai, "Nelly," JB's only sister.

**The copyrighted pictures of Alice Singh were provided by Karna Singh and were taken from the 'Heritage Collection of Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh'.**

Courtesy: Dr. Baytoram Ramharack.

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## Acknowledgement

As we celebrate the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Guyana, reflect on our cultural heritage and future, we would be remiss if we do not express deep and humbling gratitude to our ancestors. The first batch of 246 Indians set sail in the *Whitby* from Calcutta on January 13, 1838 and, after a journey of 112 days at sea, they arrived in Guyana on May 5, 1838. Five Indians died at sea during the journey. The *Whitby* headed for Berbice where it landed 164 Indians in Berbice at the estates of Davidson, Barclay and Company in Highbury and Waterloo. Interestingly, the *Hesperus* sailed from Calcutta on the 29 January 1838 with 165 passengers and arrived in Guyana also on the 5 May but lost 13 Indians during the voyage. The remaining 135 men, 6 women and 11 children were distributed to plantations Vreedestein, Vreed-en-hoop and Anna Regina. Between 1838, when Indian immigration began, and 1917, when it ended, a total of 238,960 Indians came to Guyana. We pay tribute to our ancestors and hope that this publication does justice to the vast legacy they have bequeathed us.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all the authors and coauthors of articles for this publication.

Somdat Mahabir & Ramesh Gampat  
May 5, 2018

## Contributors

<b>Somdat Mahabir, PhD, MPH</b> Epidemiologist/Scientist Maryland, United States	<b>Ramesh Gampat, PhD</b> Economist Retired from United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Georgia, United States
<b>Rampersaud Tiwari</b> Retired Senior Executive-level Guyana Public Servant Scarborough, Ontario, Canada	<b>Baytoram Ramharack, PhD</b> Political Scientist New York, United States
<b>Harry T. Hergash</b> Retired Administrator Ontario, Canada	<b>Ravi Dev, JD</b> Attorney and Activist West Coast Demerara, Guyana
<b>Rishi Pooran, MS</b> Electrical Engineer New Jersey, United States	<b>Rakesh Rampertab, Esq.</b> Attorney New York, United States
<b>Vishnu Bisram, PhD</b> Columnist and Pollster New York, United States	<b>Ramnarine Sahadeo, LLB</b> Attorney Brampton, Ontario, Canada

## Our Indian Ancestors by the Numbers (1834-1880)

**Table 1. Indians taken to overseas European territories (excepting those of Southeast Asia) in the 19th and 20th centuries.**

Colony (Country)	Period	Indian Immigrants	Indian population 1980 est.
Mauritius	1834-1912	453,063	623,000
Guyana	1838-1917	238,909	424,400
Natal (South Africa)	1860-1911	152,184	750,000
Trinidad	1845-1917	143,939	421,000
Reunion	1829-1924	118,000	125,000
Fiji	1879-1916	60,969	300,700
Guadeloupe	1854-1885	42,326	23,165
Kenya	1895-1901	39,771	79,000
Jamica	1854-1885	36,420	50,300
Surinam	1873-1916	34,000	124,900
Martinique	1854-1889	25,509	16,450
Seychelles	1899-1916	6,319	
St. Lucia	1858-1895	4,350	3,700
Grenada	1856-1885	3,200	3,900
St. Vincent	1861-1880	2,472	5,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,361,431</b>	<b>2,950,515</b>

*(Source: Swami Aksharananda, Hinduism in Guyana: A study in traditions of worship, PhD Thesis, 1993).*

Note: Table 1 excludes those who were taken to Burma (2.5 million), Malaysia (2 million), and Sri Lanka (1.5 million).

**Table 2. Areas from which Indians were taken to overseas British and French colonies between 1842 and 1871.**

Destination	Orissa	Western	Bengal	East-ern	Bihar	NWP & Awadh	Others	Total
British Gui-ana	719	14,028	2,166	238	24,681	25,681	1,164	68,547
Trinidad	378	8,396	1,305	176	11,278	16,027	853	38,413
Jamica	147	3,214	341	106	4,496	4,654	377	13,335
W.I. Colo-nies	28	1,461	266	46	2,405	2,076	100	6,382
Mauritius	3,116	33,131	8,951	1,118	108,156	47,286	3,619	205,377
Natal	2	216	24		356	370	16	984
Reunion	19	1,667	171	29	4,027	4,469	262	10,644
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,409</b>	<b>62,113</b>	<b>13,224</b>	<b>1,713</b>	<b>155,399</b>	<b>100,433</b>	<b>6,391</b>	<b>343,782</b>
<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>1.28</b>	<b>18.08</b>	<b>3.85</b>	<b>0.49</b>	<b>45.22</b>	<b>29.22</b>	<b>1.86</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Swami Aksharananda, Hinduism in Guyana: A study in traditions of worship, PhD Thesis, 1993.*

**Table 3. Emigration of Children by Gender to British and Foreign Colonies, 1842-1870**

Country	Adult Males	Adult Females	Children	% of Children	Total
Mauritius	243,853	63,459	44,089	12.54	351,401
British Guyana	53,323	16,983	9,385	11.77	79,691
Trinidad	28,030	9,280	5,209	12.25	42,519
Jamaica	10,022	3,233	1,914	12.61	15,169
Natal	4,116	1,463	869	13.47	6,448
St. Vincent	1,008	395	234	14.29	1,637
St. Lucia	1,333	401	209	10.75	1,943
St. Croix	244	60	17	5.29	321
Grenada	1,810	626	323	11.70	2,759
St. Kitts	192	113	56	15.51	361
Reunion	10,751	2,939	1,315	8.76	15,005
Guadeloupe	5,813	2,331	738	8.30	8,882
Martinique	3,667	1,336	520	9.41	5,523
French Guiana	1,320	421	165	8.65	1,906
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>365,482</b>	<b>103,040</b>	<b>65,043</b>	<b>12.19</b>	<b>533,565</b>

*Source: Swami Aksharananda: Hinduism in Guyana: A study in traditions of worship, PhD Thesis, 1993.*

**Table 4. Indians Immigrants who Returned to India from British Guiana (1835-1928)**

Immigrants	Period	Arrived	Returned	% Returned
Portuguese	1835-1882	30,685	*	*
West Indians	1835-1928	42,512	*	*
<b>Indians</b>	<b>1838-1917</b>	<b>239,756</b>	<b>75,792</b>	<b>31.6</b>
Africans	1838-1865	13,355	*	*
Chinese	1853-1912	14,189	*	*
Others	*	1,282	*	*
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>341,799</b>		

*Source: Dwarka Nath: A History of Indians in British Guiana, 1970.*

**Table 5. Distribution on Estates of Indians who Arrived on Whitby and Hesperus (1838)**

	Males	Females
Vreed-en-Hoop (John Gladstone, Esq.)	65	5
Vriedestein - - Ditto	31	0
Anna Regina, (Messrs. Moss,)	46	3
Belle Vue, (A. Colville, Esq.)	79	3
Waterloo, (James Blair, Esq.)	47	0
Highbury, (Messrs. Davidsons & Co.)	117	11
	385	22

See "Acknowledgement" section of this publication to know how many on the *Whitby* and *Hesperus* died at sea.

## Comparative Data on Crimes in Guyana by Ethnicity (Dec. 1997 to Dec. 1998)

**Note:** The following data on crime in Guyana was extracted from the two national newspapers of Guyana - the privately owned *Stabroek News* and the government-owned *Guyana Chronicle*. Both the Internet editions and actual hard copies of the newspapers were used for purposes of data extraction. The time period of the study and data covers the period December 1997 to December 1998. Violent crime reports = 155; Total number of victims = 313; No gender was identified for 103 victims.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Victims of Violent Crimes (Dec. 1997 – Dec. 1998)**

	INDIANS	AFRICANS	OTHERS	TOTAL
Victims	236 (75.4%)	60 (19.2%)	17 (5.4%)	313
Average age of victims	31	32	24	
Total number of male victims	98	43	9	150
Total number of female victims	37	17	6	60

Source: Somdat Mahabir, Presented at the Guyanese Indian Foundation Trust (GIFT) Symposium on “Structural and Institutional Considerations to Foster Ethnic Harmony, May 28, 2000, Le Meridien Pegasus Hotel, Georgetown, Guyana.

**Table 2: Victims by Type of Violent Crimes (Dec. 1997 – Dec. 1998)**

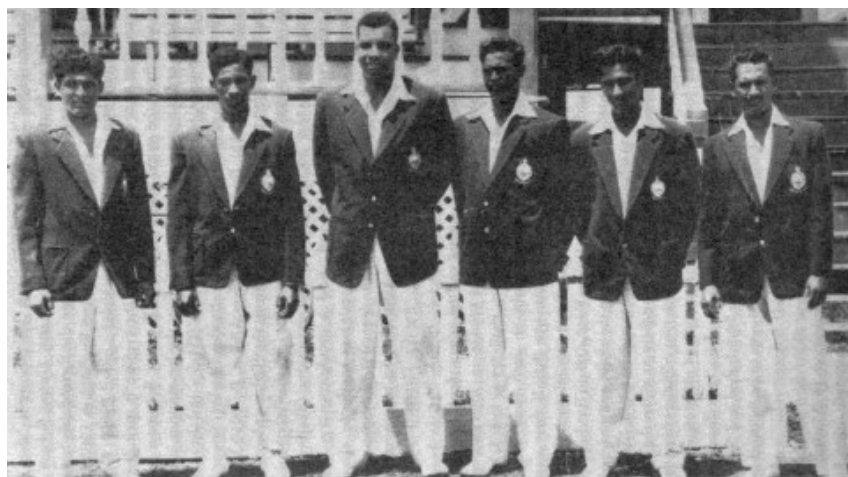
	INDIANS	AFRICANS	OTHERS	TOTAL
Robbery and Assault	189 (83.6%)	32 (14.1%)	5 (2.2%)	226
Assault	12 (48%)	7 (28%)	6 (24%)	25
Burglary	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)	--	7
Murder±	32 (59.25%)	18 (33.3%)	4 (7.4%)	54

Source: Somdat Mahabir, Presented at the Guyanese Indian Foundation Trust (GIFT) Symposium on “Structural and Institutional Considerations to Foster Ethnic Harmony, May 28, 2000, Le Meridien Pegasus Hotel, Georgetown, Guyana.

- At a lower level of detail, of the 21 murders committed during robbery and assault, 13 (61.9%) were execution-style murders.
- Of these 13 execution-style murders 12 of the victims (92.3% were Indian- and 1, or 7.7 percent was African-Guyanese.

# Indian Guyanese Test Cricketers

Sonny Ramadhin  
 Rohan Kanhai \*  
 Charran Kamkaran Singh  
 Ivan Madray \*  
 Joe Solomon \*  
 Allvin Kallicharran \*  
 Nyron Asgarali  
 Leonard Baichan \*  
 Raphick Jumadeen  
 Rangy Nanan  
 Imtiaz Ali  
 Inshan Ali  
 Sewdatt Shivnarine \*  
 Faoud Bacchus \*  
 Dave Mohammed  
 Suruj Ragoonath  
 Shivnarine Chanderpaul \*  
 Ramnaresh Sarwan \*  
 Ravi Rampaul  
 Mahendra Nagamootoo \*  
 Dinanath Ramnarine  
 Narsingh Deonarine \*  
 Sewnarine Chattergoon \*  
 Rajindra Dhanraj  
 Daren Ganga  
 Denesh Ramdin  
 Sunil Narine  
 Ryan Ramdass \*  
 Assad Fudadin \*  
 Devendra Bishoo \*  
 Adrian Barath  
 Rajendra Chandrika \*  
 Veerasammy Permaul \*  
 \* *Guyana born*



From left: Ivan Madray, Basil Butcher, Clyde Walcott, Sonny Baijnauth, Rohan Kanhai and Joe Solomon; 1956 picture.

(Source: Ranji To Rohan)



Rohan Kanhai



Alvin Kallicharran



Shivnarine Chanderpaul

Ramnaresh Sarwan



Devendra Bishoo

# Voice of our Ancestors and their Children: Struggles, Impact, and Survival

## Deaths on Ship Voyage

"Against tremendous odds, the immigrants struggled for their very survival on board ship. Overcrowding of the emigrant ships, inadequate food, lack of fresh water, water-borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery and diarrhoea, and the long and arduous voyage, made life unbearable. In many instances, the consequence was a high mortality rate to as much as 20 to 30 percent. Immigrants consoled themselves through singing, drumming and story telling, and of greater significance was the lasting friendship that developed among the 'jehazis' or shipmates." – **Tota Mangar**, *East Indian Immigration (1838-1917)*, *Guyana Chronicle*, May 5, 2014.

## Drastic changes in Hinduism

"Whatever public religion was permitted, it was within the framework of the structure and demand of the plantation that Hinduism was confronted with the greatest challenge in Guyana and the Caribbean. It did not remain unaffected and was forced to undergo a series of rapid transformation. Hinduism, of course, was never the "eternal" unchanging entity that it is often made out to be, not even in India. But changes in India were probably more organic and slower against the background of a permanent landscape with its sacred mountains and rivers, its major temples and centers of pilgrimage. Customs, beliefs, and practices, the interplay along the ever porous boundary between the Great and Little traditions, the challenge from and syncretism with Islam, the emergence of bhakti, the encounter with the British with all its consequences, and the Hindu reformers who were themselves a product of this encounter, all these were important and permanent changes. But, Kailasa in the Himalayas stood its grounds, the Ganga kept on flowing, and Kasi, the eternal city, continued to beckon to pilgrims across the land. In Guyana and the Caribbean, however, these orienting and stabilizing signposts of the sacred landscape were absent and in the absence of its cultural context changes, in Hinduism in Guyana and the Caribbean, were more momentous, more rapid, and more drastic." - **Swami Aksharananda**: *Hinduism in Guyana: A study in traditions of worship*, 1993.

## Attack and Rape

"In May 1964, the Negroes at Wismar formed themselves into gangs and went to the business places and homes of the Indians and demanded the keys of the safety boxes and drawers in which they kept their cash, jewellery and other valuable articles. Shortly afterwards, a house at Third Alley was set on fire and soon the whole area became an inferno as the gangs roamed looting, burning and terrorizing the 1,600 Indians as they tried to escape. Every man, woman and child was attacked. The men brutally beaten and the clothes of the women and even girls of tender ages were ripped away. The women and girls were raped in full public view by gangs of men." — **Dwarka Nath**, *A History of Indian in Guyana*, 1970.

## Wismar-Christianburg Massacre

"The massacre of Indo-Guyanese in Wismar and Christianburg has remained a well-hidden and well-guarded secret. Not only have Guyanese failed to record and seriously document this important part of our history but also the older generations of Indo-Guyanese have not passed on this information even orally. Up to today there is no accurate figures on the number of Indo-Guyanese that have died during the Wismar massacre. When Guyana's Independence Day is celebrated on May 26th, Indo-Guyanese should also take time off to acknowledge those who suffered and died in the Wismar-Christianburg massacre...All Guyanese must ensure it does not happen again. How can this be done? Obviously, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) recommendations which the PNC government agreed to implement must now be reflected in the Guyanese armed forces. Then any "ethnic cleansing" of other communities like Mackenzie will not reoccur again. Never again!" – **Rakesh Rampertaub**, <http://www.guyanaundersiege.com/History/wismar/wismar%20page.htm> (Accessed April 26, 2018)

## The Last Ship

"Indians in the Caribbean, as the late Professor Rex Nettleford of UWI once stated, had to "learn to be West Indian". Though he later corrected his remark to be more politically correct vis-à-vis Caribbean diversity, his utterance does align closely to the truth of the region's policy towards race and cultural relations pertaining to its Indian populations. In the islands with smaller groups of Indians, like Jamaica, the Indian presence has largely been assimilated, reflecting Nettleford's experience; but in Guyana and Trinidad, Indians, as large populations, continue the struggle for recognition and for their cultural and human rights. Our presence in Guyana is being made invisible even by the reluctance of successive governments to digitise and preserve the Indian immigration and indentureship records, which languish and steadily deteriorate in the National Archives. Of the Indian diaspora communities, Guyana is the only one where this preservation project attracts little or no state support." – **Ryhaan Shaw**, *The last ship*, *Guyana Times*, April 16, 2017

## Indians Gave Jamaicans Curry

"The use of curry in Jamaican culinary culture is a direct influence of the Indian culture. Anyone familiar with Jamaican cuisine has been enraptured by the famous curried chicken and goat dishes. Locals and tourists can also be treated to curried lobster, curried shrimp, curried red snapper, even curried vegetable dishes, for the islands more health-conscious citizens and visitors. Historically the appearance of curry coincides with the arrival of Indians. There is no historical documentation of the availability of curry on any of the Greater Antilles islands (Dominica Republic, Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Cayman) or that the indigenous Tainos, Arawacks, or Caribs used it." **Livity**, *INDIAN INFLUENCE ON JAMAICAN CULTURE AND GROWTH OF RASTAFARI*, April 22, 2016. <https://www.africaresource.com/rasta/sesostris-the-great-the-egyptian-hercules/indian-influence-on-jamaican-culture-and-growth-of-rastafari/> (Accessed on April 26, 2018)

## Hindus Influence on Jamaican Rastafari Movement

"Indian indentured servants also brought to Jamaica the Hindu practices of ganja consumption for spiritual and medicinal purposes, mystical religious practices, and a vegetarian diet. Their greatest contribution was not culinary but in the realm of spirituality. Indians had astronomical influence on the early tenets of Rastafari...The leading father of this movement that preached pride in one's African ancestry, living close to nature, and self-sufficiency, Leonard Howell, borrowed many of the early tenets of the Rastafari movement from Indians. The Ital diet, a more disciplined form of vegetarianism, derives directly from the influence of indentured servants who were vegetarians continuing an ancient practice from India...Joseph Hibbert, another founding father of Rastafari, acknowledged the Hindu influence on Leonard Howell in an interview with Leonard Howell's biographer Helene Lee. "After learning about the Hindu God incarnates Rama, Krishna and Buddha, Howell was convinced that every nation had their own God." Leonard found his African god in the crowning of Emperor Selassie of Ethiopia." **Livity**, *INDIAN INFLUENCE ON JAMAICAN CULTURE AND GROWTH OF RASTAFARI*, April 22, 2016. <https://www.africaresource.com/rasta/sesostris-the-great-the-egyptian-hercules/indian-influence-on-jamaican-culture-and-growth-of-rastafari/> (Accessed on April 26, 2018)

## Perverse Indian Racist Label

"While the Indian communities are the ones that suffer racial/political attacks, in a perverse twist, they are also the ones condemned as the country's "racists", and the violence against them is justified by a wide swathe of society including a number of Indian-Guyanese. The twists and turns that have led to this unique "racism" has its roots in Guyana's colonial past. The Indians who were viewed as "acceptable" were the educated professionals like the Luckhoos and Ruhomons. They had converted to Christianity and, in the process, had subsumed their Indian identity. These were the Indians who "arrived" into colonial society. At the other end of the colonial experience were men like JB Singh and Ayube Edun of the British Guiana East Indian Association. The majority of Indians subscribed to their view that our future lay in honouring the heritage of our foreparents." - **Ryhaan Shaw**, *Guyana's unique "racism"*, *Guyana Times*, October 2, 2016

## Indian Resistance for Human Rights in British Guiana and Guyana (1869-2003)

- **Riot at Plantation Lenora 1869:** About 300 Indian laborers (both men and women) participated in the demonstration and subsequent riot in July 1869 despite police brutality. Lutchman, Baldea and Khodobaccus sentenced to 5 years jail; Gopal and Outree were jailed for 12 months and hard labor.
- **Disturbances at Plantation Devonshire Castle 1872:** Serious disturbances by Indians broke out in October 1872 after Paraag complained of forced work for 20 hours without pay. He started an individual protest and was arrested. After that a crowd of Indians protested in solidarity. Five Indians, Maxidally, Beccaroo, Kaulica, Baldeo and Auckloo were fatally shot by the police.
- **Protest at Plantation Eliza and Mary 1873 in Berbice:** Anchraj and Persaud were jailed for instigating the strike.
- **Plantation Uitvlugt Strike 1873:** 24 Indian workers arrested and 12 were jailed.
- **Plantation Skeldon Riot 1895:** Indian laborers demonstrated against the Head Driver, Amarsingh for abuse of power. When authorities refused to open an investigation hundreds of Indians joined in protest. 12 Indians were wounded and 28 arrested, and 12 jailed.
- **Plantation Non Pareil Riot 1896:** Indian protest against the wrongful request by management to transfer Gooljar, Anghor, Budhai, Reoti and Jungli. Police killed 5 Indians and wounded 59 others.
- **Plantation Friend 1903:** Protest for substantial pay reduction. 6 Indians killed by police including Ranghabansa, a woman.
- **Plantation Lusignan 1912:** September 1912 strike by shovel gang over low wages. Crowd of approximately 300. One Indian laborer, Nankoo, was shot dead by the estate manager. 16 alleged Indian ring leaders were jailed. The estate manager was acquitted of manslaughter.
- **Plantation Rose Hall Riots 1912:** Protest against Jagmohan, the Chief Driver, and estate authorities over several grievances. 15 Indians killed, including Gobindei, a woman.
- **1914-1920:** 70 strikes/protests by Indian laborers at several estates.
- **Ruimveldt Estate Riot 1924:** Indian sugar workers from the East Bank attempted to march to the city and were met by police fire at Ruimveldt resulting in the death of 12 Indian and 1 African Guyanese; 24 Indians were injured. The protesting crowd 4000-5000 was predominantly Indians.
- **1925-1938:** Protests at several estates in Demerara and Berbice by Indian sugar workers for better working conditions and wages.
- **Plantation Lenora Riot 1939:** Protest for better working conditions and pay in February 1939; John Bahadur Singh, Ramroop, Laday, George Ram, and Abdool arrested by police; police bullets killed Robert Carter, Gunpat, Sumintra (a female weeder), and Rampersaud. Nothing was even written about these people, except a mention of their names in the paper the following morning.

- **Plantation Enmore 1948:** The strike was for better work and living conditions. It began on the 22nd of April 1948 at Plantation Enmore and quickly spread to all the neighboring East Coast Demerara plantations, Non Paniel, Lusignan, Mon Repos, La Bonne Intention, Vryheid's Lust and Ogle. On June 16, 1948, as the striking workers attempted to enter the compound, without warning the police opened fire on the crowd killing Rambarran, Lall called Pooran, Lallabajie Kissoon, Surijballi called Dookie, and Harry and wounding 14 others.
- **Plantation Leonora 1964:** 6th March 1964 during a general sugar workers strike, Kowsilla was among the men and women who formed a human barricade by squatting on the bridge leading to Leonora's factory gate to prevent African scabs, hired by the factory manager, from entering the factory to work. Kowsilla along with 14 other sugar workers were mowed down by the scab, Felix Ross. Kowsilla's body was cut in two, while several other women suffered serious injuries and some were crippled for life. Kowsilla died on her way to the Georgetown Hospital. Two other women, Jagdai and Daisy Sookram, suffered broken spines, and were crippled for the rest of their lives; Kissoon Dai, lost one kidney and had broken hips; several other Indian protestors were injured and many never recovered from their injuries. For his murderous act Felix Ross was acquitted.



*Kowsilla, Jagdai and Daisy Sookram on the day of the protest.*

- **Wismar Massacre, Rape and Ethnic Cleansing of Indians 1964:** Except for the Report of the Wismar, Christianburg and Mackenzie Commission which was established by the British colonial Government and published on January 25, 1965 ([http://www.guyana.org/features/wismar\\_report.html](http://www.guyana.org/features/wismar_report.html)), virtually no research and documentation has been done on this tragedy.



*Newspaper clipping*

*Properties in flames.*



**New York Times: "East Indians flee race violence in British Guiana mining area." Wednesday, May 27th, 1964**

*"GEORGETOWN, British Guiana, May 26—Thirteen hundred East Indians, driven from their homes by Negroes during 36 hours of racial violence in the Mackenzie mining district, arrived here today on two river steamers.*

*Police Commissioner; Peter Owen said that at least two East Indian men had been killed, hundreds of people injured and six East Indian women raped. Hundreds of homes were burned, he said. Two rioters were wounded, by police bullets.*

*With bands of marauding Negroes hunting East Indian families who had taken refuge in the surrounding forests, and continuing to set houses afire, a third detachment of troops was flown to the trouble spot 65 miles up the Demerara River from Georgetown....."*

- **1998 Riot in Georgetown:** On January 12, 1998, to quote the Stabroek News of the following day, there was "terror in the city." Indians going about their business were robbed, beaten and sexually molested. There has been no Commission of Inquiry. The PPP was in power. The Guyanese Indian Foundation Trust (GIFT) (now defunct) documented the atrocities in a report called Civil Disorder: January 12, 1998. Among the 228 victims, there were 144 (63.1%) cases of robbery, 97 (42.54%) cases of verbal abuse, and 129 (56.58%) cases of physical abuse—all by African Guyanese, including women). Of the total number of 228 victims, there were 85 women victims 44 (51.8%) were physically and sexually abused. As Indians they were victims and as women they were victims. Here are some examples, based on the women's testimonies, of the kinds of violations that Indian women suffered on Jan. 12:

*"I saw a crowd of about 13 Black males and females physically assaulting an Indian girl. I drove into the crowd and shouted at the semi-nude girl to jump into my car. She had on only panties. [Lenny Cork: C2418]"*

*"I refused to do so and he placed the knife at my throat and scrambled my clothes. I retaliated but he continued to grab on to my clothing...he tore off my blouse and I was left naked. My brother had to cover me. [Begum Arifa A33676]"*

*"I was trying to get into a bus at the East Bank car park. I was attacked by 4 Negro men who tore off my jersey and pushed their hands in my brassier. [Bibi Mahadeo Lakshman L6188]"*

*"A chop was directed to a woman in the bus. Her left arm was damaged. I saw two females lying naked on the road trying to cover themselves. [Bhanumati Dharamdeo D8331]"*

*"I was in a No. 42 bus when a Black female pulled me out saying: This is a blackman bus. Another Black female passenger who was about to embark the bus joined her. As soon as I was pushed out of the bus a group of young Black men began beating me. [Bhilari Shahanshah S5180]"*

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*Indian Guyanese were brutally assaulted in full view of the Police by roving mobs of African Guyanese, including women...The Stabroek News baldly reported the next day that "mobs... assaulted and robbed citizens..." and the Government refused to conduct an Inquiry into the ethnic violence....nd conducted the Inquiry.... It estimated at least 800 more Indian Guyanese were assaulted and over 10,000 experiencing some curtailment of their freedom of movement in Georgetown. One Indian woman was stripped.... Eusi Kwayana said the report was "fair" and later wrote that the violence was committed by Africans of whom he was not proud." - Ravi Dev, Learn from the ethnic riots of January 12, 1998, Guyana Times, Dec. 3, 2017*

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- **May 28, 2000 Guyanese Indian Foundation Trust Symposium, “Structural and Institutional Considerations for Ethnic Harmony”, Le Meridien Pegasus Hotel, Georgetown:**  
Speakers were: Lord Bhiku Parek, Dr. David Dabydeen , Radha Krishna Sharma, Dr. Madan G. Rambarran, Swami Aksharananda, Ravi Dev, Ralph Ramkarran, and Dr. Somdat Mahabir.
- **Guyana Indian Foundation Trust Crime Report, June 2003**  
The Guyana Indian Foundation Trust (GIHA), now defunct, released a crime report which showed that Indians were the overwhelming victims of crime in Guyana. The reported analyzed the problem and made recommendations.
- **Post-2003**  
Indians have continued to excessively suffer from crime in Guyana, but since 2003 there has been no data-driven report on crime in the country by either the government or any organization.
- **Lusignan Massacre January 26, 2008**  
A gang of gunmen unleashed savagery slaughtering 11 Indians, including children, slaughtered in their beds by men with shotguns and AK-47 assault rifles. The dead were Shazam Mohamed; Clarence Thomas, his son Ron 11 and daughter Vanessa 12; Mohandai Gourdat 32 and her two children, Seegobin 4 and Seegopaul Harilall 10 years old; Shalem Baksh 52; Rooplall Seecharan 56, his daughter Raywattie Ramsingh 11 and his wife Dhanrajie, called ‘Sister’, 52. Many were injured.



# Indians in Guyana From Indenture to Independence (1838-1966)

## Notes on Some Useful Dates, Events and Personalities in Print and Memory

Rampersaud Tiwari<sup>1</sup>

### ***Introductory background in India***

The ancient benevolent monarchies of India (*Maha Bharat*) ceased to exist after the disastrous battles of *Kurushetra* between the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*; and India declined progressively into a chaotic state of ownership and control of Hindu *Maharajahs*, *Rajahs*, *Princes* and land-owning *Thakurs*. The rulers of these states were gradually defeated in many battles by invading forces and their treasuries plundered and territories seized by the invaders. After the *Rajput* forces of Prithviraj Chauhan were defeated in 1192 at Tarain in present-day Haryana by the Turkic forces of Sultan Muhammad Ghori of Ghazni, Hindu rule in Delhi declined later under certain Muslim dynastic rulers. These were replaced by the overpowering rule of the mercantile interests of the British East India Company after the 1757 Battle of Plassey. Seven years later, British imperial rule was imposed in India after the Battle of Buxar in 1764. British rule ended with “partition” of the country and India (*Bharat*) emerged in 1947 as an independent nation.

### ***Military uprisings, insurgencies and civil discontent in India***

1576 – Battle at Haldighat: Maharana Partap of Mewar against Muslim rule in Delhi. However, after this historic battle, resistance to Muslim rule continued as the invaders were unable to overrun the entire country. The Rajput dynasties of Gwalior and Mewar continued to rule central India and the Rajputs of Chittor in Rajasthan defiantly preserved their territory by resisting the Delhi Sultans. India was never fully conquered by Mongol, Turkic, Mughal, Macedonian or British.

1824 – Tankara, Rajkot in Gujarat: Birth of Mulsanker (Dayanand) Tiwari to mother Yashodabai and father Karshanji Lalji Tiwari, Dewan of Tankara.

1841 – 1938: Max Muller: wrote 2 Vols of *Race/Life of the Aryan peoples*.

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<sup>1</sup>Rampersaud Tiwari was born on November 27, 1932. His Aja, his mother Shiwraji Durga Doobay, and his father Ram Nath Tiwari Maraj, settled in Buxton soon after the October 1896 Non Parel Uprising. His Ajie Mankia Ramessar joined them in Buxton soon after she arrived in Demerara in 1902. They all lived in Buxton as a family until June 1963 and relocated to Annandale as a result of violent social unrest in the community. Mr. Tiwari joined the Guyana Civil Service in 1953 and rose steadily through the ranks to become Principal Assistant Secretary/Permanent Secretary in the Ministries of External Affairs, Education, Social Development and Culture, Communications and Transportation, and Works and Housing. He was also an Administrative Cadet in The Office of the Premier (de facto Prime Minister) where he served as Assistant Secretary to the Council of Ministers (de facto Cabinet/Privy Council) from 1963 to 1964. Later in 1984, he served as Member and Deputy Chairman of the National Commemoration Commission, advising the Government on national and community cultural standards and heritage events. He was a member of the international Election Observer group from Canada for the historic 1992 General Elections in Guyana, and an Election Observer for the Organization of American States (OAS) during the 2000 General Elections in Suriname. His expertise in electoral processes led to his selection by the Guyana Elections Commission as a UNDP funded Voter Education Consultant and Observation Facilitator for the 1997/1998 overseas Election Observer groups. As a founding member and Honorary Resource Director of the Canada Guyana Forum (CGF) since 1985, Mr. Tiwari contributes to the York University Indo-Caribbean Studies Program and Social Sciences Department. He is the recipient of the 2008 Guyana Life Time Achievement Award for Public Service.

1857 – Dissent by Sepoy Mangal Pandey at Barrackpore army outpost near Calcutta: Mangal Pandey's revolt unleashed the 1857 Indian army uprising at Meerut near Delhi against British rule in India.

1869 – When he was 45 years of age, Dayanand promoted Gurukul Vedic learning and joined the Swadeshi struggle for freedom for India.

1875 – When he was 51 years of age, Dayanand formed Arya Samaj.

1907 – Lala Lajpat Rai helped establish the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic School (DAV); and in the same year Laj Rai was deported without trial to Mandalay.

1913 – 1915: Ghadar/Gadar (Revolutionary) movement formed by Bhai Parmanand and Lala Har-dyal in Astoria, Oregon, United States of America.

1917 – Indigo famine in Champaran, Bihar, and Hartal by hungry peasants;

1919 – Lala Lajpat Rai returned to India from the United States and led Indian National Congress (INC) in the famous Non-cooperation Movement against British rule in India. In the same year un-armed Indian civilians at were killed in Jallianwallah Bagh in Amritsar by Brigadier Reginald Dwyer.

1928 - Lala Lajpat Rai (Sher-e-Panjab: Lion of the Panjab) died in Lahore on November 17 after he was severely beaten with Lathis by policemen.

1939 – 1945: Nationalist activities by Indian National Congress (INC) of Nehru, Gandhi and Khansa-hib Abdul Gaffar Khan, Brahmo Samaj of Raja Ram Mohan Roy; and the Servants of India Society of Venketesh Narayan Tiwari, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant; and declaration of war against the British by the Indian National Army (INA) under the general command of Subhas Chandr Bose with Majors Mohan Singh, Abid Hassan and Hikari Khan as regimental commanders and Brigadier Laksh-mi Sehgal of the *Rani of Jhansi Brigade* of women soldiers and Captain Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan of *the Medical and Nursing Corps* in Burma during World War Two.

### ***Civil resistance in British Guiana***

1838 – First two batches of Indian immigrants arrived in British Guiana on the Whitby and Hesperus. These immigrants were recruited from the hilly districts of Chota Nagpur in Bengal. Later recruits were men, women and children from other northern, eastern and southern provinces/districts of India. They were largely from the agrarian, pastoral, trades and services communities of India.

1916 – 1953 Nationalist activities of BGEIA (1920), MPCA (1937) and PPP (1950) – J.A. Luckhoo, Snr, Jung Bahadur Singh and Bhagwandai (Alice) Singh (BGEIA); Lionel Luckhoo, Ayube Mohamed Edun, Charles Ramkissoon Jacob, Snr and Mahadai (Molly) Sudeen (MPCA); R.B. & H.B. Gajraj, Islamic Anjuman & Muslim League; Cheddi Jagan and Janet Jagan (PPP).

1917 – Indentured immigration to British Guiana ended. During the period 1838 to 1917, a total of 239,756 Indian immigrants arrived in the colony; and during the period 1843 – 1955, a total of 75,792 returned to India, taking with them \$4,716,839 in cash and jewels estimated at \$598,415: *Dwarka Nath, tables 1 & 2 in the 1970 second revised edition of "A History of Indians in Guyana" published by the author and his first edition published in 1950 by Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd of London, England, United Kingdom.* The arrivals and returnees were Hindus, Muslims and Christians who with their descendants through penury and austerity and struggles and sacrifices in blood and tears helped to promote Guyana to independence in May 1966.

### ***Bechu, an indentured immigrant worker or civil rights activist from India***

1894: Bechu (Boshunath Chattopadhyay) an articulate Bengali Hindu human and civil rights activist generally believed to be an orphan who was raised by a Scottish lady missionary in Bengal arrived *in cognito* in British Guiana in 1894 on the sailing ship Sheila as Immigrant No. 68157. He was suspected as sent either by the Friends of India Society of Annie Besant or of the Theosophist Society of Madam Blavatsky. He was indentured on Plantation Enmore where in view of his perceived inability to work in the cane fields, he was assigned house-keeping work (Butler) in the estate Manager's house.

1901: Considering Bechu's arrival in the colony in 1894, his term of indenture, if it was for 5 years, would have ended sometime in or after 1899. However, in a letter dated 06 February 1901 in the Daily Chronicle from a Tuschen eastern Essequibo address, Bechu is reported to have stated that he was about "to say farewell" to the colony: *page 254 of Dr. Clem Seecharan's Bound Coolie Radical in British Guiana 1894-1901, The Press of UWI Biography Series*. However, in the closing years of his sojourn in the colony, it was generally known that Bechu had suffered periods of ill-health and that he had gone to the Tuschen/Vergenoegen sugar estate community in the western Demerara/eastern Essequibo region to get help from an Indian and/or African Sicknurse and Dispenser of the Hospital on the estate. Bechu was believed to have died from his illness and was probably buried in the cemetery of one of the estates.

Mr. P. M. Burch-Smith, O.B.E (deceased) who was born on 14 May 1904 at Vergenoegen, knew of Bechu; and my two very good friends Rudra Nath and Rabindranath (Rabin) Sivanand (both deceased) who like Mr. P. M. Burch-Smith, were also natives of Vergenoegen heard and knew much of Bechu. Mr. Burch-Smith whose father was a Sicknurse and Dispenser/Pharmacist at the Tuschen/Vergenoegen estate hospital, had served as a Magistrate in the East Demerara Judicial District in the late 1950s. I joined the Magistrates Department of the British Guiana Civil Service as a Class II legal Clerk in May 1953. I served as Clerk of the Courts of which Mr. Burch-Smith was the presiding Magistrate; and as we travelled together to and from his Courts, we shared certain valuable memories of many aspects of the religious festivals, cultural values, traditions and customs of emancipated Africans and indentured Indian immigrants and their descendants in British Guiana. I also received much oral information about Bechu from Rudra Nath who was a Teacher and a Headmaster, and from Rabin Sivanand who was a colleague of mine in the Public Service Ministry and later, a Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President. Rudra and Rabin also remembered hearing much of Bechu from elderly indentured immigrants in Vergenoegen.

### ***Missionaries and Visitors from India***

1900–1949: Arya Samaj – Bhai Parmanand in 1910; Mahata Jaimini in 1929; Pandit Ayodhya Persaud in 1932; and Prof. Bhaskaranand in 1936. Bhaskaranand remained in Guyana until 1946.

1929 and 1938: Friends of India Society – Mahatma Gandhi's trusted friend, Rev. C. F. Andrews visited in 1929; All India Hindu Maha Sabha – Pandit Dr. Parashu Ram Sharma of Allahabad visited in 1938.

### ***Immigrant rights and enforcement***

*Indian Government observers/monitors:* Sir Kanwar Singh Maharaj, Governor of Bahraich and later of Bombay, Venketesh Narayan Tiwari M.A., Servants of India Society, Dewan Bahadur Pattu Keshava Pillai, M.P. of the Madras Legislature, Pandit Dr. Parashu Ram Sharma, All India Hindu Maha Sabha; and Rev. James Crosby who was appointed Chief Immigrant Agent in the British Guiana Immigration Department. Rev. Crosby was of the Canadian Presbyterian Church. He was known to immigrants as Crosby Babu and his office and was known to them as Crosby Office.

### ***Early Christian efforts in British Guiana***

Messages of the Gospel were first taken to Indians by Anglican and Presbyterian Ministers and Lay Preachers. *They found this work very difficult because the people had established Hindu and Muslim religions of their own;(and) an Indian man was (however,) baptized in the Lutheran Church around 1890 – ELCG (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Guyana) History, Lutheran Courts, New Amsterdam, Berbice.* Parsons/Pastors – Rev. James Radhay Persaud, Rt. Rev. Canon Neville Lalljee, Rev. Ebenezer Bhalanath Bose – Anglican; Bishop Benedict Ganesh Singh, Roman Catholic; Rev. J. A. Scrimgeour – Canadian Presbyterian Mission; Catechist Charles/Joseph Bowen (*Bhawani*), Pastors Edward Rohlfing, Aubrey Roy Bowen (*Bhawani*), Samuel Seeram Goldwyn (*Gossai*) Ramotar and Edward Ramnarain Latchman – Lutheran; Rev. Edward Higman – Methodist East Indian (*Susamachar*) Mission and Rev. Samuel Harrichand (*Shanti Ghar & Mukti Ghar*)– Christian Catholic

### ***Security, surveillance and resistance, revolt and rebellion by indentured immigrants and sugar estates***

1860: “Sarkari Gupt Sabha” (Government Secret Services Department).

1894–1895: Uprisings on every sugar estate in the colony, followed by 10 or more disturbances in each of the 10 years from 1895–1905 (*Walter Rodney: “A history of the Guyanese Working People, 1885-1908”*).

1896: Uprising of Indian indentured sugar workers at Plantation Non Pariel on the east coast of Demerara. Five workers were killed and several wounded by gun fire from militiamen under the command of Captain de Rinzy. This event attracted much local and international attention through the militant advocacy of Bechu, an Indian indentured immigrant. As a result of Bechu’s advocacy, two Inquests and a Commission of Enquiry were held: *Rampersaud Tiwari, “My Elders & The Non Pariel Uprising of 13 October 1896”, published in Think India Quarterly, Volume 14\*Number 2\*April – June 2011\*Special Issue On Indian Diaspora, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, (supported by Vichar Nyas Foundation) 2/19, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi – 110002, India.*

1838–1938: Centenary (1838-1938) Celebration of the Arrival of Indians to British Guiana by the British Guiana East Indian Association: Reprint by Dr. Baytoram Ramharack.

1939–1945: World War 2 and the long parliament in British Guiana.

1942: Indian Advisory Committee (IAC) to the Government established by His Excellency Sir Gordon Lethem, K.C.M.G with Dwarka Nath (Senior Immigration Officer) as Secretary; Genesis of progressive militancy in Guiana: Dr. Cheddi Jagan, PAC (1946) and PPP (1950); Pandit Chandr Sama Persaud, Indian National Congress of Buxton (1942); BGEIA (1918), Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, Arya Samaj, MPCA, GIWU (1947), GAWU.

1947: General elections in British Guiana: Dr. Jung Bahadur Singh, Medical Doctor, re-elected in Electoral District No.11, Demerara-Essequibo; Mr. Daniel Prabhudas Debidin, Solicitor, elected in Electoral District No. 5 Eastern Demerara; and Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Dentist, elected in Electoral District No. 6 Central Demerara.

1948: General Strike of sugar workers led by Dr. Joseph Prayag Lachhmansingh, Jane Phillips-Gay and Alexander Perry of GAWU at Plantation Enmore on the east coast of Demerara. Five workers were killed and fourteen were seriously wounded by gun-fire from policemen under the command of Major Billyeald. A Commission of Enquiry was appointed in 1948 with Justice Frederick Malcolm Boland as Chairman; and Solicitor, Mr. R. S. Persaud and Barrister Mr. S.L. Van Battenberg Stafford

as members. The Commission established that the policemen in their action had used more force than was necessary.

1949: MV Orna departed Georgetown, British Guiana for Calcutta, India with a contingent of repatriated immigrants.

1953: General election: Dr. Cheddi Jagan became Minister of Trade and Industry and Chairman of the Council of Ministers (de Facto Cabinet) and Industry and Mr. L.F.S Burnham became Minister of Education and Leader of the House, i.e, The Legislative Council.

1955: MV Resurgent, the last and final immigrant ship to sail from Georgetown, British Guiana to Calcutta, India with a complement of repatriated immigrants.

1957: General election: Dr. Chedi Jagan of the PPP (J - Jaganite) became Minister of Trade and Industry and Chairman of the Executive Council (de facto Cabinet) and Mr. L.F.S. Burnham of the PPP (B- Burnhamite) became Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council.

1960–1961: British Guiana Constitutional Conference in London – General election and full Internal self- government for the colony.

1966: British Guiana became an independent nation and the status of indentured immigrants and their descendants as citizens of India and/or the United Kingdom was earlier decided in an official Nehru Statement from India by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947 and finally determined when by operation of the act of independence for British Guiana, they became citizens of Guyana. The Indian Immigration Fund and the Repatriation Fund were consolidated placed in escrow in the national treasury of the country where it was kept until the money was used many years later to build the National Cultural Centre at Homestretch Avenue in Georgetown.

### ***Education of Indians in Guiana***

*Contribution by Arya Samaj:* Professor Bhaskaranand, M.A., President, American League, prepared Vedic Service Book of Mantras and Bhajan and Arya Darpan or Vedic Church Book for use by Arya Samajists. The latter was published in India by Pandit Ram Karan Shukla of Plantation NonPariel when he went to India on the *M.V. Orna* in 1949. Bhaskarand helped to promote the principles of Arya Samaj and teaching of Hindi in Arya Samaj mandirs and Hindi schools in many coastal rural communities.

*Indian missionaries/visitors to Guyana: 1910 and after:* Bhai Parmanand, Dr. Parshuram Sharma and Kakasaheb Kalelkar for discussions with Hindu pandits and community elders.

### ***Indian government missions to Guiana***

Demands circa 1912 by members of the Indian Legislature and the Imperial Council of India for an end to Indian indentured immigration led the Imperial Council of India after consulting with the British Government to send two of its members, Dewan Chimman Lall and Mr. Mc Neal to British Guiana to examine the working and living conditions of Indians in the colony. Their report in 1915 described these conditions as favorable. As a result, **i)** Dewan Bahadur Keshav Pattu Pillai, Deputy President of the Madras Legislature, Mr. Venketesh Narayan Tiwari, M.A., of the Servants of India Society and Mr. G. F. Keatinge, C.I.E, Director of Agriculture, Bombay visited in February, 1922; **ii)** Rajah Sir Kanwar Singh Maharaj, M. A., C.I.E, Deputy Commissioner of Bahraich in UP visited the colony in October 1925; **iii)** Dewan Chimman Lal and James McNeil followed in October, 1925; and then **iv)** a private visit to the colony in 1929 by the Rev. Charles. F. Andrews, Mahatma Gandhi's trusted friend.

1915: These visits encouraged the Honorable Mr. A. P. Sherlock, a member of the British Guiana Court of Policy (de facto Cabinet) to suggest the establishment of a committee to examine “*how the immigration of Indians to British Guiana could be examined* “. However, before Mr. Sherlock’s committee which was formally established, could begin its work, the British Government announced that emigration from India to British Guiana would come to an end in September 1917.

### **1919–1922, UK and Guiana Government Scheme for East Indian Colonization of British Guiana**

*British Guiana Missions to India:* Magistrate Mr. J. A. Luckhoo, Barrister –at-Law, and a leading member of the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA), Attorney General, Sir Joseph Nunan, Dr. Hewley Wharton and two Merchants, Messrs Parbu Sawh and Mahadeo Panday were appointed to examine proposals for an East Indian Colonization Scheme, the objective of which was to establish agrarian community settlements of Indians from India in the colony, e.g. beginning with Huist T’Dieren in the Supenaam Tapakuma Basin of the Northern Essequibo region, in the Mahaica/Mahaicony/Abary areas of the Eastern Demerara/ Western Berbice region and in the Canje Creek/Moleson Creek Basin of Eastern Berbice/ Corentyne region. After three visits to India and extensive research and conversations by the Nunan/Luckhoo team, the Colonization Scheme was abandoned as a result of objections from The Indian Government, The Indian National Congress (INC); and from the *MAHATMA*, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the saintly soul and conscience of India. An explanatory Memorandum that was prepared for the Government of British Guiana by Mr. J. A. Luckhoo was released by him and published in the Daily Argosy and the Daily Chronicle of the 17th of March, 1922.

### **Governors of British Guiana who established education policy for Indians**

Sir Augustus Hemming, K.C.M.G, 1896–1898; Sir James Swettenham, 1901–1903, *especially in his infamous Indian education Circular No. 6388 of 1902*; Sir Wilfred Collet, K.C.M.G, 1917 – 1923; Sir Geoffrey Northcote, K.C.M.G, 1935 – 1938; Sir Wilfrid Jackson, K.C.M.G, 1938 – 1941, Sir Gordon Lethem, K.C.M.G, 1941 – 1947 and Sir Charles Woolley, K.C.M.G, 1947 – 1949; Sir Alfred Savage; Sir Patrick Renison; Sir Ralph Grey, Sir Richard Luyt 1953-1966. Sir Richard Luyt served as Governor General for a brief period after independence in May 1966.

### **Government funded teaching of Hindi and Urdu in elementary schools**

Government grants-in-aid for the teaching of Hindi and Urdu in Hindu *Parthshalas*, Muslim *Madrasas* and Anglican primary schools on sugar estates, and Canadian Presbyterian, Lutheran and Methodist Schools in other communities where there were Hindus and Muslims who wanted to learn Hindi or Urdu. Mr. Ramlachan Singh Rai taught Hindi in Bethel Congregational (later Beterverwagting Government) School and his daughter Mrs. Rukmini Ramdial Singh nee Rai taught Hindi in classes that were held in the Sukhpal (Chhanman) Singh Canadian Mission School building (Annex) at Helena No. 2, Mahaica; and Mrs. Saryu Devi Mohan Ram taught Hindi in the Hindi School at 105 Barr Street in Kitty, later amalgamated into the “*Rama Krishna Dharmic Sabha Primary School*” at the same location.

### **Private founders of elementary schools**

Pitamber Doobay (Saraswat Undenominational, DeKinderen); Francis Kawall (Perpetua Kawall C.M, Canal No.2); Lachhmansingh (Lachhmansingh CM, Bush Lot, W.C. Berbice) Subedar Karamat Khan Saheb (Karamat CM, Mora Point, Mahaicony Creek)); Ramjit (Ramjit C.M, Clemwood, Demerara River); Sukhpal Singh (Helena C.M Hindi School), Ramsaroop Maraj (Dharma Shala Hindi Schools), Mrs. Saryu Devi Mohan Ram (Kitty Hindi School); Bhola Nath, Bharat, Balkarran and Pandit Paltoo Ram (*Rama Krishna Dharmic Sabha School*); Pandit Ramphair Tiwari and Victor Autar Singh (Reliance Santani Hindu School), Canje.

**Private founders of secondary schools:** Rev. J.A. Scrimgeour, Berbice High School– Canadian Presbyterian; J.I. Ramphal and M. M. Beeramsingh, Modern Educational Institute; Sugrim Singh, Modern Academy; R.N. (Bhairam) Persaud, Port Maurant High School; J.C. Chandisingh, Corentyne High School; Dr. Shri Krishna. Mangal, Dr. Jairam Bissessar, Satyajiwan Sawh and Ongkar Narayan, New Modern Educational Institute; Abdool Majeed and Satyjiwan Sawh, Muslim Education Trust College, Dr. Sitaram

Chickrie and Richard Ishmael, Indian Education Trust College, Professor Bhaskaranand (American Aryan League) and Shruti Kant, Guyana Oriental College; Professor Brahmada Madhava Bhattacharya, Tagore Memorial High School; Pastor Aubrey Roy Bowen (Bhawani), Modern Educational Institute; Alfred Ramlochan, Berbice Educational Institute; Rafeek Ali, International High School; David Dharry and Rudra Nath, Rose Hall Secondary School; Julius Nathoo, Saraswati High School; Mohamed Nazir; De Kinderen High School Classes for children of the poor; Ganga Ram Dwarka, School for Underprivileged Boys at Uitvlugt; and Kenneth Madho Persaud, Kitty High School.

### **Indian education policy makers**

Hon'ble J.A. Luckhoo, Q.C., and Dr. the Hon'ble Jung Bahadur Singh, O.B.E., elected parliamentarians who were vested with *de facto* ministerial responsibility for education in the Executive Council – Mr. Luckhoo, a Barrister-at-Law, was elected in 1916 and Dr. Singh, a Medical Doctor, was elected in 1931. Dr. the Hon'ble Cheddi Jagan, a Dentist, was elected Premier in 1961; Hon'ble Balram Singh Rai, Vice-President, American Aryan League in 1955; was elected in 1957, and served as Minister of Community Development and Education, 1959–1961; Guyana's first Minister of Home Affairs, 1961–1962 and as British Guiana's Representative (1957–1961) on the Governing Council of UCWI University College of the West Indies.

**Editorial Note:** Several other private schools established by Indians also dotted the landscape of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo. For example, Swami Purnananda established a Hindu school at Cove and John which was nationalized by the government. Tagore Memorial High School at No. 63 Village, established by Indians in the area was also nationalized by the government. Swami Aksharananda established the Saraswati Vidya Niketan High School at Cornelia Ida which is a widely acknowledged model school in Guyana.

*Picture of Saraswati Vidya Niketan (SVN) High School and school's logo*



<http://svn.edu.gy/>

<http://svnguyana.org/>

# The Demise of Arrival Day?

Ramesh Gampat<sup>1</sup>

## Meaning of the Term

By “Arrival Day” we mean 5 May, which was the day in 1838 when Indians first landed in British Guiana, now Guyana. That was a geographic landing. Today, 180 years later, we have invested that geographical landing with an identity (Indian Guyanese), one we did not have even as late as the 1950s for we were still referred to as “East Indians.” After a long battle in which Ravi Dev played an instrumental role, 5 May was declared a national holiday. Sadly, the terminology was butchered, victim to ethnic interests: Arrival Day, not Indian Arrival Day.

Long before the arrival of an identity and a “Day,” our culture flourished. Numerous mandirs and mosques grace and spiritualize the Guyanese landscape and Holi (Pagwah), Deepavali, Eid-UI-Azha and Youman-Nabi are national holidays that draw all races into celebrating the Indian way of life. Indian cuisine, including rice, curry, dhal, roti and sweet rice (*kheer*), is loved by all people of Guyana, and the country would be poorer without Indian music and dance. Agriculture is dominated by Indians, who saved the sugar industry from destruction after Emancipation in 1838. Indians created the rice industry from scratch and without them the country’s private sector would be a shadow of what it actually is. Medicine, business, finance and construction are dominated by Indians. Guyana is the land where the bones of your ancestors and mine, the indentured immigrants, were buried, and their blood, sweat and tears have rendered the land fertile and productive. Without Indians, Guyana might have been a poorer country. It was George Lamming, an African Barbadian novelist, who wrote in *The West Indian People* (1966) a special tribute to Indians: “...those Indian hands – whether in British Guiana or Trinidad – have fed all of us. They are, perhaps, our only jewel of a true native thrift and industry. They have taught us by example the value of money; for they respect money as only people with a high sense of communal responsibility can” (Nagamootoo 2013).

Indian Arrival Day is not a celebration of the geographic landing, but a celebration of the remarkable achievements by a people who have transformed Guyana in a matter of 180 years. Those achievements shine even brighter when one considers the hurdles my people confronted: the evils of indenture, racial discrimination and marginalization, persistent crime perpetuated against them by mostly Africans, violence and destruction of property, the Wismar pogrom, the post-independence use of the price mechanism to transfer huge surplus values from the rice and sugar industries to Africans and hostile living conditions (Endnote 1). We even had to wage a long and bitter battle to legalize cremation. While Jung Bahadur, who died on 6 November 1956, was the first person to be cremated in Guyana, cremation was not legalized until many years later.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ramesh Gampat was born in Essequibo. He is an Economist, who has worked for almost three decades with the United Nations Development Programme. While stationed in Asia, he was a member of the team that prepared four Asia-Pacific Human Development Reports and is the co-editor (with Anuradha Kati Rajivan) of a two-volume book titled *Perspectives on Corruption and Human Development*, which was published by Macmillan (Delhi) in 2009. He is the author of *Guyana: From Slavery to the Present. Volume 1. Health System and Guyana: From Slavery to the Present. Volume 2. Major Diseases*, both of which were published by Xlibris (2015). Dr. Gampat has also published academic papers on inflation, poverty, international trade, human development, gender and corruption. He was a tutor in Economics at the University of Guyana (1981-1983) and an academic faculty member (2005-2006) of the United Nations Development Programme’s Virtual development Academy, hosted by Jones International University.

Undoubtedly, Arrival Day is a time for reflection: our broken past, where we stand today and where we shall be in, say, another 180 years. Yet most of our “Arrival Day” reflections seem to be reflections about the past, about the trials and tribulations of our indentured ancestors. We seem to be stuck in that time frame: 1838 to 1917. The happenings during those 80 years are indeed worthy of reflection less we fall victim to amnesia for Indians seem to have a very short memory. Many of us have forgotten about the Wismar pogrom, which took place in 1962, the pain of which is magnified by the fact that 26 May, one day after the bloody massacre, was selected by the African government, as Guyana’s Independence Day. It is like rubbing salt into the Indian wounds inflicted by Africans.

This essay looks to the future and wonders if Arrival Day is fated to go the way of the dinosaur. After all, a certain number of Indians need to live in the country to make Arrival Day meaningful. A certain mass of people is central to the survival of their culture and way of life. The de-Indianization of Indians in Jamaica and the smaller Caribbean Islands bears testimony to the validity of this hypothesis. What is that “certain number?” It is not an easy task to determine this number, which must take into consideration total population size, the growth rates of all ethnic groups and migration, among other things. Here I skirt the issue and venture that the “certain number” is 240,000, which is approximately the number of Indian immigrants who came to the country during the indenture period (1838-1917). I propose that when the number of Indians living in Guyana dips below this benchmark the significance of Arrival Day will be diminished and will probably raise questions. The plaintive sound of alarm bells will reverberate across the land – for whom or what would the bells toll? When will that seminal event happen?

### **Shrinking Indian Population**

The *relative* importance of Guyana’s Indian population component peaked at around 52.2 percent in 1968 and fluctuated slightly around that level until 1980. Thereafter, it commenced a rapid decline and by 1991 Indians accounted for 48.6 percent of the country’s population and a significantly smaller proportion (39.8 percent) by 2012. At the height of its proportional strength in 1968, 361,871 Indians lived in Guyana. In terms of *absolute* numbers, the Indian population peak at 394,417 in 1980, which is more than two decades later after its *relative* strength climaxed in 1968 (Endnote 2).

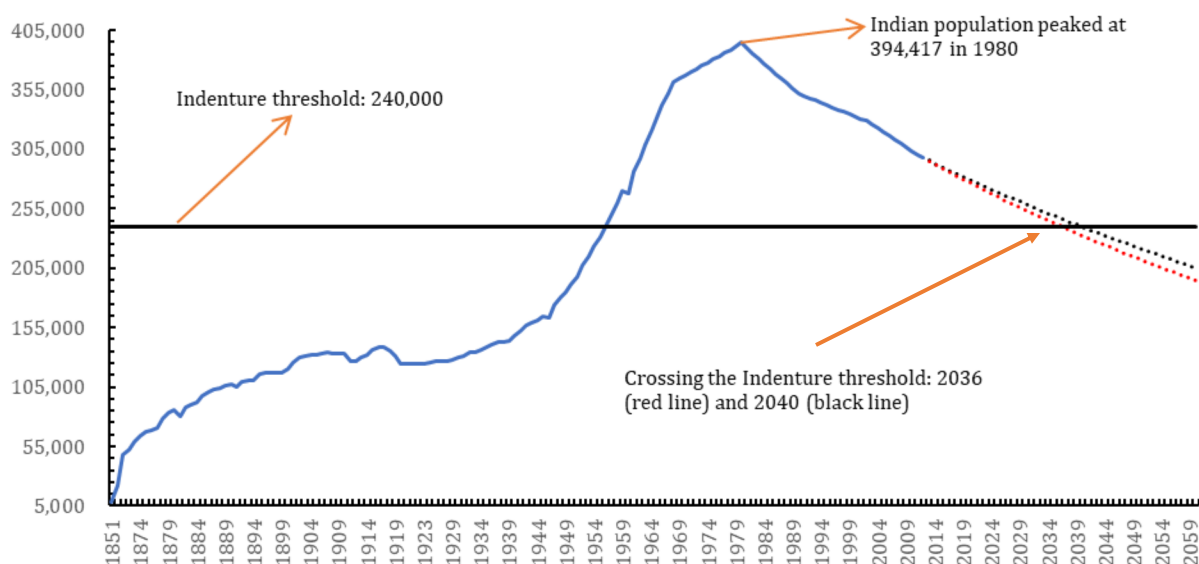
While the absolute size of the Indian population continued to grow, its rate of growth began to decline from around 1962, when there was massive violence against Indians perpetuated by Africans. The violence began with protests against the so-called Kaldor budget, which was but a foretaste of what was to come. Those aligned against the PPP include the PNC, UF, the Trade Union Congress/PSU and capitalist interests represented by the Chamber of Commerce. The focus was principally on the urban masses. The idea was to incite violence, strikes and lockout (i.e., closing business by employers to give the impression that workers were on strike). As the tension and hostilities escalated, violence exploded in the city on Friday February 16, 1962, encouraged by the Governor’s refusal to call in the British troops until the situation was totally out of control. By the time the violence, arson and looting on Black Friday was contained, six persons were shot and killed, forty-one injured; fifty-six premises were destroyed by fires and eighty-seven damaged and looted; and several police vehicles were damaged. The cost of this fiasco was estimated in excess of \$40 million or 12 percent of that year’s GDP. By this measure, the one-day destruction to property and life is one of the mostly costly in the world. Violence against Indians peaked in 1964 at Wismar and Christainburg on the eve of political independence from Britain. Indians were murdered, raped and burnt alive in the country’s worst racial violence (Ali 1993). Indians had no option but to flee the Wismar-Christianburg area. This was the first, and perhaps the only, incidence of ethnic

cleansing in the Caribbean. The maneuvering to wrest the government away from the PPP and placed it the hands of the PNC led to a ruthless dictatorship that systematically victimized and discriminated against Indians.

In response to the violence and declining prospects of Indians in Guyana, growth of this population component, which grew at an annual average rate of 3.61 percent during 1950-68, slowed and then, more remarkably, began to contract. The exact year of this seminal event – when the Indian population began to shrink - is unknown as the requisite data are not available. However, the Indian population fell by an annual average of -0.98 percent from 1980 to 1991. Negative growth continued but moderated, declining by -0.66 percent from 1991 to 2002. During the thirty-two years from 1980 to 2012, the Indian population contracted annually by -0.77 percent. The actual size of the Indian population fell to 351,939 in 1991, a decline of 10.77 percent from its peak (394,417) a decade earlier. The last National Population Census (2012) counted 297,493 Indians, which represents a contraction of 24.6 percent from 1980. Put differently, the size of the Indian population in 2012 was only three-quarter of what it was in 1980. That is the frightening magnitude of Guyana's shrinking Indian population.

If the Indian population continues to decline by -0.77 percent annually as it did during 1991-2012, it will reach 239,593 in 2040. If it continues to contract by -0.88 percent as it did from 1980 to 2012, it will reach 240,627 in 2036. If these assumptions hold, the Indian population will dip below the threshold value of 240,000 in the next eighteen to twenty-two years. That will happen in your lifetime and mine. Figure 1 is a visual presentation of this dismal prognostication. Note that the dotted lines are the forecasted Indian population based on the assumption of an annual contraction of -0.77 percent (black dotted line) and -0.88 percent (red dotted line). Our grandchildren will inhabit a land where the Indian population moved from dominance to non-dominance, from the largest ethnic group to the third largest ethnic group, exceeded by people of mixed races and Amerindians.

Figure 1. Indian population: crossing the Indenture threshold, 1851-2060



Sources: Based on data from Nath 1970: Table 4:229-32; Bureau of Statistics 2016: Figure 2: 3; Author's projection for 2013-60.

What does this mean – an Indian population sinking below the indenture threshold? No one knows for sure and I turn to my crystal ball once again. The celebration of Arrival Day requires a context weighted more towards the present and future than the past for it to have meaning and color, significance and pride. The geographic landing day on 5 May will remain unchanged and nothing can alter that historical event. But what would we be celebrating when the number of Indians falls below 240,000? I speculate we shall be “celebrating” the deconstruction of Indians: their culture, way of life and contribution to the economic development of the country. All these will fade, albeit gradually, from around then. Of course, it is hardly likely that Indian presence in Guyana will be erased but very likely that their visibility in terms of their culture, wealth, power and political muscle will recede far away from what they actually are on this 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Arrival Day.

### **Two Reasons for Shrinkage**

There are two major reasons for continued decline of the Indian population: falling fertility rate and outward migration. Total fertility rate represents the number of children that would be born to a woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years and bear children in accordance with age-specific fertility rates of the specified year. Guyana’s total fertility rate contracted from 6.4 in 1960 to 3.8 in 1980 and to around 2.5 in 2017. That is, the fertility rate of a child-bearing female today is only about 40 percent of her counterpart in 1960. Of course, this is an average for all ethnic groups, but anecdotal evidence suggests that an Indian couple in today’s Guyana do not want more than two children. Data on the fertility rate by ethnic group are not available or at least not published.

Perhaps the major drag on the declining Indian population is migration to other countries (Gampat 2016a; 2016b). Data are not readily available, and, to compound the issue, the 2012 Census offers a misleading insight. Of the four major ethnic groups, Indians and Africans suffered a decline from 2002 to 2012, while people of mixed racial backgrounds and Amerindians increased their numbers. The combined contraction of Indians, Africans and others (minor groups) amounted to 41,692, while that of mixed people and Amerindians increased by 22,805 and 9,817, respectively. Overall, Guyana’s population fell by 4,268. What role has overseas migration played in the decline of the country’s population by 0.57 percent? The data is messy, and my estimate below must be interpreted and used with caution.

As a starting point, let’s hypothesize that the outward flow of Indians played a significant role in the decline. The basis for this hypothesis is that the Indian shortfall accounts for 69.1 percent of the combined shortfall of Indians, Africans and others; the other two major groups, people of mixed racial backgrounds and Amerindians, gained strength. To interrogate this hunch, let’s turn to the data/estimates.

Consider, firstly, the estimate from the 2012 National Census (Compendium 1, p 14-18) for the period 2007 to 2012. The data for estimating arrivals and departures were obtained from household responses to questions contained in the individual/ household questionnaire. Departures are defined as citizens “who departed their respective households to live permanently abroad during the period and for whom respondents from their respective households attested to their departures and gave some basic characteristics of them ...” Arrivals are defined as Guyanese citizens who have lived outside of Guyana continuously for the six-year period, “but who returned and were living as individual members within their respective households on or prior to Census night 2012.”

The definition of departures raises no major issues. That of arrivals, on the other hand, is confusing and probably misleading. It seems to say that persons who departed to live permanently abroad between 2007 and 2012 but were present in the household on the night the census was taken are

counted as arrivals – they had “returned and were living as individual members ...” This perspective of arrivals is certainly true, but it is not the whole story. In fact, the majority of such “arrivals” came on business, vacation or to visit family and friends and then departed for their foreign homes. This ‘error of commission’ is one of the main reasons for the low net migration count of 1,906 during the six-year period (departures = 7,238, arrivals = 5,332). Evidence that the figure of 1,906 is a huge underestimate comes from the United States Embassy in Guyana, which, according to the Bureau of Statistics, issued 5,185 Guyanese with permanent visas in 2012 alone.

The Bureau of Statistics caveated its finding with the warning that a very low net migration “suggests a strong pattern of underreporting.” It offers two reasons for the “underreporting.” First, no count of people who lived in vacant or closed buildings was possible. Such buildings accounted for 10.3 per cent (22,561) of the total stock of buildings in 2012. The huge proportion of vacant buildings is itself a cause for concern because it is a visible, tangible symbol of the outward trek; of abandoning the “Magnificent Province,” as John Brummell called Guyana in 1853. Second, it is possible that a “considerable number of respondents” forgot and/or deliberately withheld information about household members who migrated to live abroad. This is, of course, a natural response of skeptical people.

In what follows, I endeavor to arrive at my own estimate of how many people left Guyana to live abroad permanently during the decade from 2002 to 2012. The tool for this exercise is the basic population growth identity: population increase (PI) during any given period, usually a year, equals natural population increase (NI) plus net migration (NM). Using high-school algebra, this identity may be stated thus:

$$(1) \quad PI = NI + NM$$

Natural increase is the difference between the number of births and deaths, which is about 14,500 and 4,500 respectively, or around 10,000 so that  $NI = 100,000$  for the entire decade. Guyana’s population fell (negatively grew) by 4,268 from 2002 to 2012. Restating identity (1) and solving for net migration:

$$(2) \quad -4,268 = 100,000 + NM$$

$$(3) \quad NM = -4,268 - 100,000$$

$$(4) \quad NM = -104,268$$

That is, net migration – which is a drain on the population and hence the negative sign – during the decade between the last two censuses was over 100,000. This figure is consistent with the difference between departures and arrivals as reported in the last Quarterly Statistical Bulletin (March 2016): 99,253, which is very close to the estimate arrived at in identity (4). Since the country’s population declined by only 4,268, how could so many people have migrated? Seemingly, it does not add up. The answer, as per the above elementary algebraic identities, is that entire natural increase of the population plus a portion of the principal have apparently migrated overseas. In other words, heavy out-migration and declining fertility rates are driving the decline of Guyana’s population.

Even though Indians migrate at a far higher rate than other ethnic groups, assume for now that their average population share for 2002 and 2012 (41.63) equals their share of net migration. Then around 43,407 Indians left Guyana to take up permanent residence abroad. Needless to say, this is a huge underestimate for the simple reason that the Indian population fell by 8.82 per cent during the decade, while that of Africans declined by only 3.78 per cent. Moreover, the natural increase of Indians is probably higher than that of Africans: the former has a higher birth

rate and mostly likely faces the same death rate as Africans.

Now assume that ethnic population decline is carried over to net migration. Indians and Africans accounted for 69.1 per cent and 20.6 per cent of the contraction of Guyana's population between 2002 and 2012, respectively. These 'missing' Indians and Africans could be assumed, most reasonably, to have migrated overseas. Applying this proportion to net migration (identity 4), then 72,049 of the 104,268 Guyanese who left for abroad permanently were Indians, and 21,479 were African. My estimate thus confirms the hypothesis that Indians are migrating in droves, and at a higher rate than other ethnic groups.

Most likely, the outward trek explains the rapid fall of the Indian population. The migration of Indians began around the early 1960s and coincided with the rise of violence against them and the destruction of their property. The siege accelerated in the 1970s and exploded in the 1980s as the economy deteriorated and government policies, implicitly or explicitly, pushed Indians even further into the margin of Guyanese society and the country's economy. While economic, social and political conditions are still fueling Indian migration, the "acquired pull momentum" of the stock of migrants in foreign countries is an important driver. This dynamic stems from families sponsoring other family members back in Guyana and from marriages of a foreign Guyanese to a local one. Another important pull factor is the allure of a rosy living in countries such as the United States and Canada. Foreign Guyanese supply misleading information to their relatives, especially when they visit, to paint a utopian picture of life abroad. I once heard a joke that brings home the point more graphically. An Indian Guyanese, salivating for years at the prospect of untold luxury abroad, eventually got a chance. Sponsored by a family member, he landed at JFK and, having cleared immigration and customs, he headed out to reach waiting relatives. On the way out, the man saw a \$50 bill on the floor and, with head held high up and brimming with arrogance, he kicked the bill aside. "Lil thing," he muttered, "plenty and bigger ones outside. Me goh be rich soon." Guyanese back home believe that "money a grow pan tree in Nath America." Undoubtedly, the "greener pasture" perspective is a strong motivation to migrate.

## **Conclusion**

This essay is provocative, controversial and probably premature. Like meteorologists, economists have a dismal forecasting track-record. They are more often wrong than right. With this caveat, I have dusted off my crystal ball and reprogrammed it with two assumptions that are, in my view, reasonable. If the conditions that permit the contraction of the Indian population during the last four decades or so continue to hold, my crystal ball churns out a chilling prediction: the number of Indians living in Guyana will fall below the number of immigrants who came to the country from 1838 to 1917. I interpret the breaching of the "Indenture threshold" as a signal of the coming demise of Arrival Day. Whatever collective economic power, historical claim to building Guyana, political clout and cultural wealth and perhaps culinary delights Indians have bequeathed to Guyanese – all these will wane, falling from a peak and trending downward without any hope of a reversal. That prospective seminal event is a signal that Indians as a force in Guyana will fall from grace. Of course, we will still celebrate Arrival Day, which is an unalterable historical fact, but its significance will lose its shine, its glow, and perhaps the pride and joy we have invested in it. To the leaders of the British Guyana East Indian Association (now defunct), including Joseph Nunan and Joseph Luckhoo, this would be a nightmare. After all, these leaders wanted a colonization scheme to bring additional Indians into Guyana, which would have increased their numerical strength and relative importance in Guyana (Endnote 3). This did not happen, and Mahatma Gandhi played an important role in the failure of the scheme. History may still be on our side, but the future is apparently deserting us.

## Endnotes

1. A glimpse of the conditions under which Indians lived during indenture and even as late as the 1980s is provided by a correspondent of the *Chronicle* (the 5 January 1902 issue), who writes of the “feculent material floating about and around dwelling houses, low houses [having] floors soaking in the water.” George Lamming (1981), in his remarkable foreword to Rodney’s book, wrote movingly that “[T]he morning would awaken men to the smell of animal corpses. For days there would follow the spectacle of rotten goat or sheep or cow, a decomposition of carcasses stuck or afloat across the hidden landscape. Workers quenched their thirst from this same mud and water. Fever struck; gastroenteritis prevailed. They waded through a catalogue of pestilence” (p. xviii). He was referring to the horrible living conditions during 1881-1905.
2. The issue in this paragraph is a contrast between a proportion and an absolute number. As a *share* of Guyana’s population, that of Indians reached its apex in 1968, but in terms of the *number* of Indians living in Guyana the apex was reached in 1980.
3. The Negro Progress Convention (NPC) wanted a similar scheme that would allow migration of Africans from West Africa and other parts of the West Indies into British Guiana. In December 1923, the Secretary of the NPC spoke publicly about their concern: Africans, he said, were afraid Indians would vastly outnumber them if the Colonization Scheme became a reality

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# Arrival is Not Geographical

Ravi Dev<sup>1</sup>

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, the nation commemorates Indian Arrival Day. The holiday is officially designated “Arrival Day”, putatively to recognize all the other immigrant groups that were brought by the planters to labour on the sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery. These groups would then include the Portuguese and Chinese as well as Indians but there has not been any noticeable participation by the descendants of these industrious and hardy pioneers since the holiday was ushered in back in 2004. In 2016, President Granger – leader of the PNC-led coalition announced that the Arrival day of the immigrants other than Indians would also be recognized – but not as a Public Holiday.

In the run-up of the efforts to have the day officially recognized, we had predicted this outcome not merely because May 5<sup>th</sup> was the specific day Indians arrived in Guyana -Portuguese landed on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and Chinese on January 12<sup>th</sup> - but because the latter two groups, especially the Portuguese, never demonstrated any collective inclination to remind themselves or the nation that they had arrived as immigrants to this nation. Whatever the reasons for this self-induced amnesia, it may be time for the government to alter the omnibus appellation that probably forcibly reminds these communities of a circumstance they would rather not deal with. Trinidad also initially ushered in an “Arrival Day” holiday but soon changed it to “Indian Arrival Day” without raising any fuss.

But whether we call the holiday “Indian Arrival Day” or “Arrival Day”, there is still the objection originally raised by the African Cultural and Development Association (ACDA) as to why should Africans celebrate an occasion that resulted in the undercutting of the bargaining power for their labour? Whether the group that was used as scabs were Indians or Portuguese (as I have argued) to break their seminal 1847 strike, the argument needs to be addressed. There are several ripostes apart from pointing out that because of the loss of preferential prices from England in 1846, if wages were not cut the entire industry would have had to be shuttered. Sugar planters were not in any position to give the old wages and this was the case in all the islands.

Firstly, the occasion is not mandated to be “celebrated” but to be “commemorated”. This is not an idle semantic distinction. Occasions are commemorated in a manner intended to inculcate some value into the participants, related to the occasion. It is from this perspective that we have been criticising some events in Mashramini, which we feel do not serve to promote the values necessary for the authentic realisation of Republican status. “Holocaust Day”, which has been proposed by ACDA as a holiday (and supported by the Select Committee on Holiday in 2004) is meant, I am sure, to *commemorate* and not *celebrate* one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the world – the uncountable deaths of so many Africans during the Middle Passage. I believe that the way that ACDA has been commemorating the event over the past few years is most touching and appropriate and inculcating a palpable ethos of overcoming in the African Guyanese community.

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<sup>1</sup>Ravi Dev has a degree in Law from Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center, New York. He is a former Member of Parliament. He was a leader of the Jaguar Committee for Democracy, and later the Rise Organise and Rebuild Guyana (ROAR) party which won 1 seat in Guyana’s 2001 general elections. After that he retired from active politics and continued his activism for Indian rights and justice in Guyana.

The arrival of Indians – especially because of their relatively large numbers and the decision of most of them to remain - has impacted on the rest of Guyanese society in profound ways and other groups can reflect on these to commemorate Indian Arrival Day. In the economic realm, apart from the early undercutting of wages, the Indian's immigrant drive for material accumulation has been transmitted to their descendants and has influenced how they exploit economic opportunities in the present. This is not unique: when African Guyanese emigrate to the US, they exhibit these same immigrant values and stand out in their new communities. Maybe the same resolve and wherewithal can be reinforced right here through activities and events on Indian Arrival Day. A similar argument can be made for dealing with the political consequences of the demographic changes precipitated by Indian Arrival - about which ACDA and Eric Phillips have been very vociferous in highlighting.

But there is a deeper level at which the whole society might deal with the question of arrival. After all, every group that now inhabits this land of many waters came from somewhere else. It is taught to us from our earliest lessons in Primary School – but we seem to forget as soon as the school doors close – that even the Amerindians came across the Bering Straits. So, in the most mundane geographical sense, we all arrived by merely setting foot on this land. We have posited before, however, that “arrival” can also be looked at from an aspirational perspective: arrival becomes not a “where” but a “what”. What is it that each one of us, individually, sectionally and collectively want to become? When we have achieved that, then and only then we would have “arrived”.

As a start, I believe that we all want to live in dignity and in peace. On May 5th, let us therefore at least spare a thought as to what we can do as citizens and as groups to create the conditions in this land of immense possibilities to move us closer to that goal. Arrival can thus become a notion that can bring us together rather than divide us as it does presently.



*The Estate Hospital.* Source: Jenkins 2010 [1871].

# Remembering Alice Singh of Guyana: Notes from her Diary

Baytoram Ramharack<sup>1</sup>

*...They [Europeans] never forget who they are, and, like them, we must revere the memory of our forbears, and try to carry onwards the best of their wonderful culture, not only for our own benefit, but for the purpose of bringing to our fellow Guianese the teachings and the culture of Mother India.*

-Alice Singh, *Dramag*, newsletter of the British Guiana Dramatic Society, no date.

## Introduction

On May 5, 2018, Guyanese will celebrate the 180th year of Indian arrival to Guyana. While Guyanese will celebrate the event in diverse ways, May 5<sup>th</sup> is also a time of reflection as to where Indians have come as a people since the two ships, the *SS Hesperus* and *SS Whitby* left India from Kolkata in 1838. Others will assess the progress made by Indians as a people since their arrival in the New World. Many Indians played a crucial role, whether by their political and social activism or through their literary narrative in addressing the issues Indians encountered during and after indentureship. The names of outstanding Indians who played such a role would certainly include, Bechu, Joseph Ruhomon, Peter Ruhomon, JI Ramphal, Jung Bahadur Singh, Balram Singh Rai, Cheddi Jagan, among others. However, the role of Indian women who were staunch supporters of the movements against human rights abuse, oppression and injustice, have not been fully appreciated, much less explored. One reason for the lack of historiography of Indian women lies in the fact that women were often seen as supporters of men, rather than leaders, in their own right. Some of the women who have helped to raise Indian consciousness and address issues affecting Indians include Kowsilla, Mahadai Das, Ryhaan Shah, Alice Singh and others.

Among Guyanese women, Alice Singh deserves special recognition because of her pivotal role in promoting Indian culture and awareness through an organization she created (she was a member of many social and religious organizations) called the British Guiana Dramatic Society (BGDS). However, one of her most important legacy remains her contribution in the literary field. In what could be considered as one of the earliest narrative written by a woman (Joseph Ruhomon's 1894 work stands out as the first assessment of the status of Indians in Guyana), Alice Singh left a diary which shed light on her own childhood and family experience. Her diary remains an important literary piece, not simply due to her writing style, but for the wealth of information she shared with her readers about growing up in Suriname and life in Guyana.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Baytoram Ramharack was born in Berbice, Guyana in 1960. He attended Berbice Educational Institute, before migrating to New York City in 1976. He completed his BA in political science at CUNY's City College. He received both his MA and PhD degrees from New York University. He has taught political science at New York University, Dowling College and at Nassau Community College, where he is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Political Science. His two major books on Guyana include the *Centenary Celebration of the Arrival of Indians to British Guiana (1838-1938)* and *Against the Grain: Balram Singh Rai and the Politics of Guyana*. Dr. Ramharack is currently working on a two volume study on Dr. Jung Bahadur Singh (a prominent Hindu legislator and ship surgeon who was the first person to be officially cremated in Guyana) and Alice Singh (whose work with the British Guiana Dramatic Society helped to promote Indian culture through drama in Guyana).



*Wedding reception of JB Singh, and his bride, Alice Bhagwanday Persad with her maid-of-honor in Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana (Suriname) on January 23, 1910. The mid-morning wedding reception was held at the home of Babu Lachman Singh, a wealthy landowner and good friend of the bride's father, Sital Persad. The copyrighted pictures of Alice Singh were provided by Karna Singh and were taken from the 'Heritage Collection of Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh'.*

This research takes a closer look at the content of Alice Singh's literary work found in her diary, often, commonly referred to as her "memoirs". As such, this investigation will be guided by the question: "Who was Alice Singh?" While exploring this question, information, drawn from a forthcoming comprehensive study of Alice Singh's contributions in the area of drama, will also be provided in some detail so that readers can develop a better understanding of her character and background.

### ***Alice Singh's Diary***

Gaiutra Bahadur's book, *Coolie Woman*, presented a historical non-fiction account of women's experience of indenture life based on Bahadur's meticulous research into the life and journey of her great-grandmother. Aside from telling the story of her life at the request of her eldest son, Hardutt Singh, Alice Singh's memoirs provided some insights into women's experience of indenture and the



*Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh with family and friends at their home, "Ayodhya," at 273 Lamaha Street (purchased in 1923), North Cummingsburg, Georgetown, British Guiana (Guyana), circa. 1928. From left to right: (standing) Pratap Narine, "Tappie," their fourth child and third son; Indal, JB's youngest brother; Pitamber Doobay, JB's closest friend and confidante; Mrs. Singh; and Victor Ramsaran; (sitting, back row) young lady (name unknown) and Efreda Chandrawati, "Moon," eldest daughter; (sitting, front row) young lady (name unknown) and Gangadai, "Nelly," JB's only sister.*

***The copyrighted pictures of Alice Singh were provided by Karna Singh and were taken from the 'Heritage Collection of Dr. and Mrs. JB Singh'.***

post-indenture reality. However, while Alice Singh's own narrative was not as detailed and exquisite as the story told by Ryhaan Shah or Gaiutra Bahadur, her narrative reflected what Allison Klein (2015) characterized as "casual in style and content", echoing largely on domestic matters and her family's early personal experiences. Though not a prolific writer, Alice Singh admitted that she was "no writer...neither...scholar" but, as she sat down to write her diary, "thoughts come tumbling on (me)" (notes from Diary).

Jerome Egger (2016) has argued that Alice Singh, wife of JB Singh, being born in the neighboring Dutch Colony of Suriname, brought with her a rich history and experiences that complemented JB Singh's work in the preservation of the cultural heritage of Indians in Guyana. While the history of Indian immigration to the Dutch Colony may have shared a similar pattern of development compared to British Guiana, Alice Singh's family, like the elite class in British Guiana, was also influenced by Christianity (as suggested by her name). However, Alice Singh's father was very much involved in shaping the identity and protecting the interests of Indians in the neighboring country of Suriname. Before Jagan's first encounter with JB Singh in 1935, it was clear that JB Singh's character and political vision for Guyana had already taken shape with the full support of his socially conscious partner, Alice Bhagwandai Singh (Alice Singh).

By her own admission, Alice Singh sat down on three occasions to handwrite her entries in English: April 27, 1958, April 9, 1959 and April 27, 1961. It stands out as an important hand-written document. Jerome Egger noted that Alice Singh's diary represents a:

... unique...voice of a woman in her own writing...in Surinamese and Guyanese indentured historiography...one by a woman of Indian descent...(notes from Egger, 2016:1).

Even though Alice Singh wrote her diary in English, she knew how to communicate in Hindi and Dutch, along with "sranan" (or "sarnami"), a common lingua franca used by the people of Suriname. If there was one major shortcoming about her revelations, it was reflected in the fact that Alice Singh did not share any enlightening personal details in her memoirs regarding their life together in British Guiana. What was clear was that through her strengths, efforts and commitment, Alice Singh became a champion of the poor and her work among Indians had an impact on the shaping of the Indian identity, particularly among the members of the British Guiana Dramatic Society.

### **Family history**

Alice Singh used the spelling "Bhagwandai" for her name from the 1920s. Even though the name "Alice" was not on her birth certificate, her passports and other official documents gave her name as Alice Bhagwandai Singh. Her father, Sital Persad Doobay had arrived in the Dutch Colony of Suriname with his mother, Phuljaree, in 1882. Alice Singh described her rebellious grandmother, who was assigned to work in a Dutch sugar cane plantation, as *"young, pretty and a fighter"*. Refusing to enroll her son in the Dutch colonial education system, Phuljaree homeschooled her son and provided an opportunity for him to develop a greater ability to communicate in his native Indian language. Homeschooling paid off as Persad later impressively became *"a fine scholar in Hindi"* and a learned individual in *"Indian affairs"*. His understanding of the Hindi language guaranteed him a job as a Hindi interpreter, which, in turn, elevated his status as a respected member of the Indian community in the Dutch Colony. Her father eventually became the Chief Interpreter of Hindi and Urdu and he maintained a position with the Immigration Department of Suriname. As a respected member of the community, it was no surprise that Alice wrote of her father as a member of the upper caste or a Hindu Brahmin.

Alice Singh's father, who interacted with the Indian laborers in the western district of Nickerie (where her parents were from), was married to Mary Dully, a Christian girl, in a civil marriage that took place on March 29, 1894. However, the marriage had already been consummated under Hindu rites before this date, and by 1894, the couple had already produced two children. Eventually, Alice Singh's mother, her mai (grandmother), traveled to Paramaribo, where she lived, and where Alice (Elizabeth Bhugwandye), was born and raised. In her diary, Alice Singh noted that her mother encouraged her to go *"to church during the festive seasons"*, but her father who attended the Christian functions showed very little interest because he *"always slept"* during those events.

For some Indians, accepting the Christian faith was a means through which a person could be exposed to greater opportunities that could help them move up the social ladder by seeking employment in colonial institutions. Alice Singh's mother was influenced by Christian values but while she may not have been totally devoted to Christianity, she continued to respect her own faith, as well as that of her husband for much of her adult life. As Alice Singh noted in her diary, while her mother *"gave up going to church and did all the pujas"* to please her father after he died, her mother *"went to church during the festive seasons."* Her mother frequently attended the Methodist church in Kingston, Georgetown, whenever she visited British Guiana. Family lore, however, suggests that Alice Singh's mother was a Hindu from childbirth, keeping caste ideas, respecting dietary laws and

observing Hindu rituals in her father's home (Karna Singh interview). Alice Singh, however, did not demonstrate any of the Christian influence shown by her mother. She never attended Christian church services, owned a Bible and hardly ever spoke of Christianity among family members (interview with Karna Singh).

Karna Bahadur Singh, a grandson of Alice Singh and JB Singh remembered his grandmother and paid tribute to her legacy with the following words:

*Alice Bhagwandai was of cosmopolitan background from education and experience. Convent educated, open to the varied influences of her mother and father, a gifted linguist...she exerted a strong influence on her husband with her more sophisticated background. She also worked with her father in the Immigration Office, Paramaribo for some time and her developed social consciousness and experience in East Indian affairs was useful when she and her husband began similar work in British Guiana. She was an early type of the East Indian emancipated woman* (Karna Singh interview).

As was reflected in her writings, Alice Singh was not a typical laborer who was exposed to the hardships brought about by rigorous and dehumanizing plantation life. Her memory and experiences with her mother and her grandparents instilled in her created the values that were reflective of what Allison Klein (2015) referred to as an emulation of “*a feisty, outspoken woman*”. Her Bengali grandmother was the daughter of a Brahmin priest and the widow of a wealthy landowner who, as Alice Singh tells us, were “*just farmers, but...had plenty of land,*” reflecting their upper caste influence. Alice Singh (she was called Alice by her mother, but her father referred to her as Bhagwandai, a Hindi term for “God’s gift”), the second of three children (Henry and Willem were her other siblings), was born at 7:00 am in Paramaribo, Suriname, on April 22, 1892, 19 years after the first batch of Indian indenture laborers arrived in Dutch Suriname in 1873 on the *SS Lalla Rookh* (about 35,000 Indian contract laborers arrived in Suriname between 1873 and 1916). One brother, Willem, suffered a mental illness due to a head injury that left him retarded early in life, while her other brother, Harry, became a sailor. Harry died at sea at the young age of 30. Alice Singh had a relatively privileged childhood in the urbanized environment in which she lived, one that was not synonymous with the majority of Indian immigrants who found themselves in the Dutch or British Colony.

### ***Growing up in Suriname***

Unlike her husband, Alice Singh, was born in a cottage in neighboring Suriname (JB Singh was born in British Guiana), near *Stenbakery Straat*, in the heart of the city of Paramaribo in Suriname. Both countries are contiguous to each other with largely coastal residents. Georgetown and Paramaribo, two capitals of Guyana and Suriname respectively, are about 213 miles apart and easily accessible by a combination of boat and car transportation. The indentured period of Indians (they call themselves (Hindustanis) in Suriname, a former Dutch colony, started with the arrival of Indians on the *SS Lalla Rookh* in 1873. In 1831, Suriname had a population of 61,000 and among them 53,000 were slaves. By 1863, when slavery was abolished, the slave population was reduced to 33,000. After the abolition of slavery in 1863 an apprenticeship system, the *Staatstoezicht*, as it was called, was established with the main goal to keep most of the Creoles as labourers on the plantations for 10 years.

From 1873 to 1916, Dutch plantation owners brought 34,000 Indians from India to prevent the sugar industry from total collapse. The first ship bringing Indians to the Dutch Colony, the *SS Lalla Rook*

arrived in Suriname June, 5 1873 with 410 Indian immigrants in Suriname. The number continued to increase, and by April 4, 1874, there were almost 4000 indentured Indian labourers in Suriname. Indian immigration to the Dutch Colony was a major turning point in the development of the Colony because the arrival of a continuous flow of Indian immigrants meant that the plantation owners could address two major problems, namely, the labor shortage and the problem of a decreasing population. Although Indian immigration ended in May 1916 when the last transport arrived, Javanese immigrants (from Indonesia) began in 1890. Approximately, 12,000 of the Indians who went to Suriname returned to India. (Choenni, 2016). The overwhelming majority of the Hindostanis who settled in Suriname migrated from Western Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Very few *Madrassis* (South Indians) migrated to Suriname. Since most of the indenture Indians spoke Hindi, Bhojpuri and Avadhi, and later the local Surinamese language, sranam, many of them were able to maintain their traditional culture.

Alice Singh's maternal grandfather was believed to have been a Kshatriya from Bengal who came to the Caribbean region as a Christian missionary Hindi interpreter of language. His job as a district language interpreter provided him with the opportunity to travel to several nearby Caribbean areas, including British Grenada, British Guiana, and Dutch Suriname. Alice Singh's father was able to move up the social ladder to become Chief Interpreter of Indian Languages. At the time, an interpreter played a significant role in the Colony by facilitating the communication system between the immigrants and the colonial authorities. It was not surprising that many of these occupations originated from the immigration department, which, like the harbors ("stellings"), was an important hub of social activities central to the lives of the Indian immigrants.

Alice Singh was the daughter of Hardutt Sital Persad (Sital Persad Doobay) and Mary Dully from Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana. Alice Singh's father maintained an influential relationship with the Indians of Suriname as a protector of Indian rights. He was frequently consulted on matters that Alice Singh referred to in her diary as issues dealing with "*Indian affairs*". Hardutt Sital was 14 years old when he and his mother, Phuljaree, arrived in the Colony from Basti in the Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh (India), several years after the first batch of Indian laborers landed in the Colony in 1873. According to Alice Singh, Phuljaree must have been a fighter because she was willing to protest against the authorities when she was not happy with her conditions of employment. Her protest against a manual labor position assigned to her opened up an opportunity to be moved to a less consuming labor intensive occupation, leading to her new position as an assistant nurse in the sugar estate hospital.

Mary Dully's father was first stationed in Grenada before being sent to British Guiana as a missionary interpreter. Alice Singh's father, Hardutt Persad, was fluent in Hindi and Urdu and this educational background provided him with the opportunity to become Chief Interpreter in the Immigration Department in Dutch Guiana. Hardutt Sital Persad and JB Singh's uncle, Babu Rampersad, were close friends. Both of them had previously, frequently, it appeared, conspired and discussed a possible marriage arrangement between JB Singh and Alice Singh. Alice Singh's father played the important role of Chief Interpreter of Hindi and Urdu, the two common Indian languages spoken by the Indian immigrants at the time. It cannot be confirmed as to what specific Hindu caste her parents belonged to but it was generally accepted that they were from an influential, upper class family.

Alice Singh was born on April 22, 1892 in Suriname, which at the time was controlled by the Dutch. Upon her death in 1970, following a cremation ceremony, like her husband, her remains were scattered in the Demerara River. As she explained in her memoirs, Alice Singh's birth certificate listed her registered name as "Elisabeth". She preferred to use and spell her name as Elizabeth.

Jerome Egger (2016), who examined the contents of Alice Singh's diary, concluded that "Elisabeth Bhugwandye Singh" was a Surinamese-Guyanese female who gave an important voice to the Indian immigrants by describing her own personal experience of her struggles and tribulations in both colonies. Her account provided insightful information on the experience of an Indian woman who grew up in the Dutch Colony and who later made a significant contribution to the preservation of Indian culture in British Guiana, particularly through her involvement in the British Guiana Dramatic Society.

In terms of social and economic development, Suriname was not much different from Guyana, but the elites from the much smaller Indian community in Suriname resided in Paramaribo, the hearth of the Colony. Given her social status, and the environment in which she grew up, Alice Singh seemed to have had a relatively privileged childhood. Her middle to upper class lifestyle allowed her to share fraternal relationships with "creole" people of different backgrounds, including the daughters of a Dutch Financial Secretary and the Attorney-General (*Diary*). According to notes in her diary, she attended St. Louise Convent School in Paramaribo, Suriname, where she was taught to speak and write in English, Dutch and French. While Hindi was not taught in her Christian school she was able to learn enough Hindi at home (she learned much of her Hindi from her father), to allow her to communicate comfortably in the Indian language. Later, she worked as a typist in the Government Immigration Office, where she met JB Singh who was a sick nurse and dispenser during their initial encounter.

### ***Getting married***

JB Singh worked very closely with his wife in politics, social work and the promotion of Indian culture in Guiana. They were married in an elaborate ceremony on February 23, 1910 in Suriname. The marriage itself was a long and extensive affair. The event required three different ceremonies before its completion. After the wedding, the bride and groom traversed from Suriname to British Guiana. The civil wedding was made official at the office of the marriage officer, the *Burgerlijtstand* in Paramaribo, followed by a Christian wedding and church blessing (influenced by Alice Singh's mother) and culminating in an extravagant traditional Hindu marriage ceremony which was conducted "*under maro*" (in recognition of her Hindu background) in the compounds of the Immigration Depot in Suriname.

It was only fitting that the Hindu wedding was conducted in the Immigration Depot which was an important institution that addressed issues facing the Indian indenture laborers during colonial rule. With hundreds of devotees and Hindu leaders who showed up at the wedding pavilion, their approval was given to:

*...the union between a Brahmin girl and a Singh (notes from Diary).*

JB Singh never thought of himself as a Brahmin. Alice Singh's reference to being a "Brahmin girl" in her memoirs seems to be more of an affirmation of her family's upper class status, rather than caste ascription. The wedding culminated at 12 midnight with fireworks, music and feasting. Later that night, the married couple journeyed their way to British Guiana at 2:00am to their home in Goed Fortuin, where the festivities continued throughout the night.

That JB Singh's and Alice Singh's marriage was held under Christian and Hindu wedding ceremonies was due to the influence of Alice Singh's mother, but a more pressing reason to do so was because of the restrictive rules established by the British and Dutch colonial authorities regarding Hindu marriages. Despite the restrictions, Hindus in the Colony did not care for the derision associated with "*bamboo marriages*" under a *maro* and the illegitimacy that the British and Dutch authorities ascribed to the children procreated under such marriages (Ramharack, 2005). [An Indian wedding

was often referred to as 'Bamboo Wedding' based on the fact that this was a gala event and in India, a large tent composed of readily available indigenous bamboo was considered necessary. When lighted and elaborately decorated, a bamboo tent presents "*as very pleasing and artistic appearance*", see Ruhomon, 1988:120].

Since Hindus were willing to accept the teachings of their *dharmashastras* (Hindu religious and legal treatises) such marriages, by tradition, were considered valid and binding on the married couple. Unlike Christian marriages, colonial authorities did not recognize Hindu and Muslim marriages, and, thus, Hindu and Muslim marriages were not considered legal and binding. As a result, no official provisions were established to legalize such marriages (Smith and Jayardena, 1958). Children born to parents whose marriages were sealed under Hindu and Muslim rites were ultimately deemed '*illegitimate*'. They could make no claims to property rights, a rule that also applied to wives who were married under such rites.

Alice Singh was quite jubilant at the Hindu marriage ceremony at the "koeliedepot" and she was proud of her "Brahmin" background, as well as the fact that she was being married to a 'Singh', who had met with the pundits' approval. Alice Singh's remarks regarding the wedding, especially the Hindu ceremony was expressed this way:

*...From there Ma arranged that we should go the Infirmary Church for the blessing. After this there was a gala reception at the large home of Babu Latchman Singh, a wealthy landowner and a good friend of my Pa. So I had my civil marriage, so this complied with law of the land, (and) my church blessing for Ma. But the real thing was in the evening - my Hindu marriage. This was a brilliant affair. The Immigration Depot was loaned for the occasion, all decorated. ...There were hundreds of invitees, Indians and others (notes from Diary).*

While greatly impressed by the elaborate celebrations, the length of time it took to complete the entire wedding celebrations was a little taxing for the young Alice Singh. In her diary, she noted that during the party in the immigration depot, her father made sure that "all the pundits in the land took part" (Diary). For Alice Singh, the presence of the pundits legitimized and sanctified her marriage to JB Singh. Alice Singh was 18 at the time of her marriage and it was important that her Hindu identity be recognized during her marriage. She noted that this part of the wedding was the "real thing". Her comment that the "maro was ah so beautiful", was an indication that she was thoroughly appreciative and satisfied with the Hindu part of her marriage. Since Hindus were willing to accept the teachings of their *dharmashastras* (Hindu religious and legal treatises) such marriages, by tradition, were considered valid and binding on the married couple. Unlike Christian marriages, colonial authorities did not recognize Hindu and Muslim marriages, and, thus, Hindu and Muslim marriages were not considered legal and binding. As a result, no official provisions were established to legalize such marriages (Smith and Jayardena, 1958). Children born to parents whose marriages were sealed under Hindu and Muslim rites were ultimately deemed '*illegitimate*'. They could make no claims to property rights, a rule that also applied to wives who were married under such rites.

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It can be argued that Alice Singh’s three wedding ceremonies during her marriage to JB Singh was an attempt to legalize their union by complying with established colonial laws, while fulfilling an act that reflected legitimacy associated with traditional Hindu values. As Alice Singh admitted:

*I had my civil marriage, so this complied with law of the land, [and] my church blessing for Ma. But the real thing was in the evening my Hindu marriage. This was a brilliant affair (notes from Diary).*

For Alice Singh, regardless of established colonial laws, having a Hindu marriage under the traditional “maro” was essential, necessary and proper. The Hindu marriage ensured, and protected the legality of her union with JB Singh. Following the marriage, Alice Singh was set to embark on a new life in British Guiana with her husband.

As noted above, Alice Singh has made a concerted effort to maintain and promote Indian culture in Guyana. Her effort in this area and her promotion of plays originating out of India has been the hallmark of her contributions to Guyanese society.

Like many Indians at the time, Alice Singh’s marriage to JB Singh, as well as the marriage of her parents reflected the interplay between social and economic considerations. According to Alice Singh, Mary’s father:

*...was an ardent admirer of all things ‘European and civilized’ with a righteous contempt of all things ‘Hindu and infidel’ (notes from Diary).*

Looking through the Christian lens, in a society dominated by European colonial values, Mary’s father did not think that Sital, whom he saw as “an ordinary coolie, heathen boy who had dared to aspire to his daughter’s hand,” was a good match for his daughter. But Phuljaree, Sital’s mother, held on to her Indian cultural values and insisted that Sital do the same:

*She would not allow her son to be taught Hollandish. She taught him Hindi [Hindi] instead with the result that Papa became a fine Hindi [Hindi] scholar, and though he spoke Dutch well and read a little, he was a poor Dutch scholar (notes from Diary).*

Alice Singh felt that the marriage of her parents was a romantic match made in heaven. However, Alice Singh’s own experiences and the many years she spent with JB Singh would be punctuated with an immersion into a traditional Hindu environment. In her later years, she saw herself as a

conscientious volunteer, and a social worker in a European dominated social and political system, even as she worked as the medical office manager for JB Singh from 1925 to 1956. The exposure to European and Indian cultural expressions in her native Suriname was not saturated with a denial of space for the existence of both cultural experiences (Hindu and Christian) and the combined religious experiences of both parents. Nevertheless, Alice Singh made a commitment to dedicate her adult life to addressing issues that plagued the majority of Indians in British Guiana.

Alice Singh's marriage to JB Singh under both Christian and Hindu rites would appear in some ways to represent a dramatic replication of the cultural differences that surrounded the marriage of her parents. Her extensive wedding ceremony under Hindu and Christian customs was a grandiose attempt to consummate her own marriage. In a strange way, it was an attempt to legitimize the marriage of her parents in the eyes of the Indian community.

### ***Alice and Jung Singh***

Alice Singh was fifteen years old when she completed her education in neighboring Suriname. In those days, there was not much one could do after completing secondary education, except to get married, seek employment in the Colony, or pursue higher education in the core European country. It was at that age when it occurred to Alice Singh that she was going to be married to JB Singh. Her destiny, though unique given her upper class urbanized lifestyle, was not very different from many young Indian women whose marriages were arranged by family members, friends or parents. Following her studies, Alice Singh quickly landed a typing job at the Immigration Department. She helped her father keep track of the rations for immigrants coming from India. Occasionally, her father secured photographs from his aunt in India enquiring about the possibility of finding a suitable husband for marriage. It was at times expected that in such an event Alice Singh might travel to India where she would consummate the marriage with the prospective groom.

However, writing in her memoirs, Alice Singh explained that her father made alternative arrangements with a close friend of his, Babu Rampersad, who was a compounder on the immigrant ships for Alice to marry JB Singh. It was settled. Alice Singh's dad and his close friend agreed that Alice would marry Babu Rampersad's only sister's child, his eldest nephew who made frequent trips with Rampersad and his father to Bengal. This of course, was JB Singh who hailed from Goed Fortuin, West Coast Demerara in British Guiana. Alice Singh had remembered that she had met the young JB Singh previously when he visited the Immigration Department. As Alice Singh explained:

*...When I was a little over 15 years old, one day sitting at the typewriter at the immigration department some strangers came into the office. My Pa looked for one who seldom showed emotions in those days, quite pleased and excited. He greeted these men one old and one quite young, after which he took them into the Agent General. When they came back to the general office there was a round of introducing. So Jung Bahadur Singh was prefix to me. He was quite smart, well-dressed. For one, he was overdressed, since we in Dutch Guiana dressed simply (notes from Diary).*

Alice Singh had finally met the man to whom she was to marry but their meeting was not fortuitous. JB Singh had developed a keen interest in Alice when he initially saw her on several occasions while she was at the immigration depot as a worker. As Alice Singh noted in her memoirs:

*The name [JB Singh] seem familiar to me and when I remembered, which was almost at once. I knew that this was Babu Rampersad's nephew, who I was supposed to be married to someday. Years later he told me that he knew me at once, as he had seen me when he was about seven years old. My face had just appeared to him when he*

*was about seven years old. My face had just appeared to him when he was at play and he never forgot. Of course this became a standing joke but he insisted that it was true. So they went away to India to return the following year with an immigrant ship, to be reached; it was in February, 1908 (notes from Diary).*

This, however, would not be JB Singh's last trip to Mother India.

Her father was overjoyed at matchmaking and the planned marriage, was long in the making, through meticulous and careful arrangement by Babu Rampersad. However, Alice Singh's mother was not overly impressed when she heard the news of the marriage plans. As Alice Singh explained:

*...Ma was not impressed, as this young man had no special qualification and in her opinion, a compounder was only a dispenser. She had such hopes that I should be well settled in life, through a good marriage (notes from Diary).*

JB Singh and his uncle did return to Dutch Guiana once in 1908 before the wedding, but Babu Rampersad would not live to see the wedding he so perfectly arranged because he died of a stroke and was buried at sea as the immigrant cargo ship approached British Guiana.

### **End notes**

Alice Singh was a founding member of the Women's League of Social Service. It was this organization which spearheaded the Women's Institute in Guiana. She was a member of the Guiana Red Cross Society and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Alice Singh was also actively engaged in the work of the Guiana Tuberculosis Society, as well as the Lakshmi Sabha, which was the women's auxiliary arm of the Santa Dharma Maha Sabha, an organization which was established by her husband. JB Singh played an active role in ensuring the institutionalization of a more traditional form of Hinduism in Guyana. On February 10, 1936, Alice Singh founded the *Balak Sahaita Mandelelee (BSM)*, a society whose stated goal was to provide financial and other forms of assistance to needy children in the Colony.

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# Taan Singing 180 Years After Indian Arrival In Guyana

Somdat Mahabir<sup>1</sup>

## ***What is taan singing?***

*Taan* is not to be confused with *taal* or *taala*, which is the beat or punctuation component of Indian music. *Teental*, for example, is a basic sixteen beat *taal*. *Taan* music is a unique style developed by indentured Indians and their descendants in Guyana that is based on memory back in India of *taal* (pitch), *swara* (the notes or *sargam* of *Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni, Sa*) and *raaga* (the arrangement of *swaras*; for example, the arrangement of *Sa Re Ga Pa Dha Sa* is *raaga bhoopali*). All forms of Indian music including Guyanese *taan* is rooted in *taal*, *swara*, and *raga*, but the singers and musicians have not benefitted from any formal training, and as a result the songs and music, like Indian folk music, are rich in vocal scales, rhythm and meaning.

*Taan* in Guyana is an old Indian singing style of wide-ranging pitch and rhythm, usually with an *aa-laap* (an introduction to the song by the singer) in the form poetry. In Surinam, *taan* singing is known as *baithak gana* and in Trinidad it is often called classical music and in some categories associated with “chutney” music. *Taan* singers are accompanied by musicians who play the *harmonium* (pumped organ-like instrument), *dholak* (two-faced hand drum), *dhantal* (steel rod percussion instrument), *manjeera* (finger cymbals), and sometimes other instruments as well. In the very early period, the *baansuree* (flute), *dhaaplaa*, *nagaara* and *taassaa* drums and *saarangi* were part of an even more intricate *taan* singing style. Overall, in the context of Guyana, *taan* is a style of Indian folk songs that is rooted in north Indian folk genres, but in clusters that attempt to follow popular notes such as *dhrupad*, *thumree*, *tillaanaa* and popular *raagas* such as *bhairavee* and *daadraa*. No *taan* singer or musician were professionally trained. To this day, professionally trained musicians are rare in Guyana.

The language of Guyanese *taan* incorporates Hindi and dialects such as Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Braj Bhasha representing geographic origins in India from where Indians came. For example, Braj is a region in Uttar Pradesh where Krishna lived. Occasionally, Sanskrit phrases were also incorporated into the songs.

*Taan* singing and musical variations are based on mood and emotion, and collectively represent the Hindu repertory from geographic regions of origin such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, etc. The songs of *taan*, although unique in rendition and music, incorporate such wide-ranging categories of songs as *lachaaree* (fast rhythmic folks songs of which chutney style was derived), *biraha* (pain of separation from a lover or someone dearly loved) and *bidesiya* (longing for reunion with

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Somdat Mahabir was born in Berbice. He attended Tagore Memorial Secondary School where he was also a teacher. He is currently a full-time Scientist and Adjunct Full Professor. He was previously a faculty member in the Department of Epidemiology, MD Anderson Cancer Center, The University of Texas. He received his PhD from New York University, MS from New York Institute of Technology (NYIT), and MPH from New York Medical College (NYMC). He received academic awards from both NYIT and NYMC. He did his post-doctoral fellowship in Cancer Epidemiology at the National Cancer Institute. He has published over 40 papers related to cancer in peer-reviewed science journals and has co-edited one book, “Nutraceuticals and Health: Review of Human Evidence” published by Taylor and Francis, 2013. He enjoys learning Sanskrit and has been teaching Bhagavad Geeta continuously since November 2012.

the beloved), *ahirwaa* (related to cattle rearing professions), *kajaree* (related to rice planting), *bhajan* (honoring Gods), *matkorva* (roadside short night *puja* performed by women to the Mother Earth accompanied by waves of rhythmic song and dance with themes of fertility and procreation, sexual innuendos, the domineering mother-in-law, lascivious *Pandit*, etc.), *vivaaha* (wedding songs), *sohar* (songs celebrating childbirth), *muran* (songs after birth when the baby's head is shaved), *gudanaa* (arm tattoo), and *pachraat* (Kaali puja-related), etc. Keep in mind that Hindu weddings used to be done in the night (*shadi ki raat*) and *taan samelans* (programs) were also popular evening-night events. Other categories incorporated in *taan* include songs related to Hindu *utsava* (festivals) such as Phagwa and Diwali. Extractions and depictions of scenes from Mahabharata and Ramayana were wildly popular in the *taan* repertory and were incorporated from the *ulaar-aa*, *chaitee*, *jhuumar* and *chowtaal* compositions. Guyanese *taan* singers were also composers of their own songs drawing from oral traditions passed down in families. In the old days, it was common for *taan* singers to compose on the spot because they were good at language and drew from their experiences on the cane fields, rice fields, cow mining, etc.

### **Uniqueness of taan**

Practitioners and connoisseurs of *taan* music spanned people of different socioeconomic and occupational classifications. The unique style of music represents a perfected form of Indian culture that was appreciated across the Indian population because it told everyone's story – the struggles of life, hopes, Gods, values, love, corruption, etc. For Indians, *taan* expressed their place in *kaliyuga* (the current degenerate cycle of time and place) and they searched and got meaning in their compositions about their glorious and expansive cultural past, of the time of Gods like Krishna and Rama, of the *Rishis*, *Swamis* and *Yogis*, and heroes like Bheeshma, Drona, Arjuna, Karana, Bheema, etc. They sang about their women as Seetaa, Saraswati, Laxshmi, Durga, etc.

*Taan* is deeply rooted in Hinduism although not confined to Hindu artistes. Hindus (both men and women) were the largest group of *taan kalaakaar* (artistes), but Muslims and even some Afro-Guyanese were well-respected *taan kalaakaars*. As in Suriname and Trinidad, in Guyana, Hindi and its dialectal forms, Bhojpuri and Awadhi were commonly spoken by Indians and were the foundation of *taan's* infectious rhythmic melody. In *taan*, there is elegance and rhythmic complexity all in the same piece of music.

The uniqueness of *taan* as it was done in the days when it flourished flowed from the intellectual abilities of the singers to give salutations to divinities or to give a clue as what they were about to sing in the form of *aalaap* (introduction to the song) that included *doha* (couplets) or other poetic compositions that preceded the actual song. An example of an *aalaap* is: “*oonche sar se baansuree, bajaaye jab Ghanshyama ne, sare aalam jhup pare, uskey najar ke Shaam ney*” (from high on His head, when Ghanshyam plays the flute, the whole world is open to His vision of Shaam). As in this couplet, rich in philosophical interpretations, *aalaaps*, usually are philosophical pieces, often self-composed by the *taan kalaakar*. For this *aalaap*, one can tell in advance that the singer will now proceed to sing a song about Krishna.

In the good old days of *taan*, singers had to be able to compose and sing and, therefore, it was almost compulsory for them to speak and understand Hindi and the dialects. From my experience, in Berbice, *taan* singers never used song books, unlike the *bhajan* singers of today, predominantly with monotone singing, and prevalent inabilities to pronounce Hindi words and understand meaning. It is annoying to hear *bhajan* singers including “Pandits” read pre-existing translated meanings of Hindi or Sanskrit compositions. This *language deficiency syndrome* (LDS) and dependency on pre-existing English translations will lead to the conquering of innocent minds. The inabilities of Indians

in Guyana to speak Hindi and dialects, once common medium of communication, has been the biggest and deadliest blow to *taan* music.

*Taan* musicians were a common part of the Indian village system and they played important cultural roles. It was also a form of socialization and recreation, and might have helped to cement relationships and strengthen *jahajee* bonds. It also brought psychological comfort to Indians during a time when they existed on the edge of Guyanese society and were uncertain of their future. Families would usually invite *taan* musicians for programs at their “bottom-houses” where they would be arranged in a circle and take turn to sing, carrying on as close as possible the message of the prior song in the cycle. Not only were the messages of the songs captivating, but the music from the *dholak*, *harmonium*, *dhantal*, *manjira* and *jhaal* was so intoxicating that members gathered to listen would clap their hands, stand-up and dance, or respond in kind with a *doha* of their own. It was not uncommon to witness, when the sessions reached a certain high point than a *taan* singer, when the music “bite” him/her would literally appeal for the chance to sing before his/her circular turn. *Taan* singing was a regular component of “keeping wake” when an Indian died, but the compositions were focused on *karma* (good action), love for God, family, etc. It was also an important part of weddings and birthday celebrations. *Taan* was also a regular fixture at the village Mandirs, where *taan* singers and “Pandits” in subtle ways exhibited differences that all could see. It was common knowledge that the *taan* singer would patiently wait for his opportunity to “throw hints” in his compositions at “Pandits,” caste and corruption.

A good example is found in the following *taan* composition in which the Babhan (Bihari word for “Pandit”) is mocked:

*Babhan aave jaaee, babhan aave jaaee,*  
(The “Pandit” comes and goes)  
*mor man laaga babhanavaa,*  
(My mind is on this “Pandit”)  
*aavat jaatee, ajee aavaat jaatee...*  
(He has come back today)  
*Ohe babhanavaa kee ekta hee aankhiyaan...*  
(This “Pandit” has only one eye, he is looking all around... )

The *taan* singers also played a key role in oral history because Indians were an excluded people, their culture and food were mocked at, their work was supposed to be confined to the hard labor of the sugar plantations and mud fields, their brethren were seen as alcoholics, wife beaters, illiterate, and uncultured. They had to be policed by people of other ethnicities, as is the case today.

*Taan* singers and musicians were mostly poor artistes, unlike many “Pandits” who made handsome sums of money from their fellow Hindus, had no political allies to foster their art form that was dependent on Hindi and Bhojpuri/Bihari dialects. “Pandits” aligned with political parties for their own selfish motives, not for language preservation. For example, the Guyana Pandits Council (GPC) aligned with the People’s National Congress (PNC) and the Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha (GHDS) with the PPP. Another blow to *taan* and Indian cultural heritage came from several early elitist Indians, including lawyers, doctors, politicians, and businessmen who converted to Christianity and became “mimic men”. Indian *taan* singers, against all odds, fought valiantly, and are still fighting to hold on to their language and culture. Guyana like the rest of the Caribbean is a place where the most prevalent music is that of “African-derived black and Creole populations” (1).

Hindus, *taan* singers, and large segments of the Indian population were let down by their hero politician Cheddi Jagan, who slapped the bourgeoisie tag on Indian businessmen, and did nothing to safeguard Indian culture. Jagan and his political disciples never appreciated the importance of *taan* in understanding the lives of Indians, especially the lives of the village people. Even today, in Port Mourant, Cheddi Jagan's place of birth and the home of several outstanding *taan kalaakaars*, the place remains undeveloped and has seen massive migration out of the community.

Today, the survival of *taan*, a gift by Indians to the cultural diversity of Guyana is endangered. Yet, the political fraternity comprising the People's Progressive Party (PPP), Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha (GHDS), and the Indian Action Committee (IAC), all by their premise and actions seem to have ownership claim on Indians, do nothing meaningful to help others ensure that *taan* does not become extinct. Let us not forget that the Indian community has already witnessed the demise of the *panchayat* (village council problem solving system). Economist Dr. Tarron Khemraj observed that there was a serious group known as the Guyanese Indian Heritage Association (GIHA), but "the PPP was uncomfortable with this group as it was focusing on the serious matter of how to make Indo-Guyanese share equally in a multi-ethnic society." Dr. Khemraj noted that the PPP felt that GIHA was intruding on their "human property, the East Indians of Guyana and diaspora". He stated that the PPP eventually displaced GIHA with "the milder Indian Arrival Committee (IAC)", which "focuses more on mimicry as the conformist leaders of that outfit seem to think East Indians of Guyana – long separated from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and South India – should mimic Bollywood culture...these days a song and a dance, *a la* Bollywood, are promoted as the only thing the rich heritage of Caribbean Indians has to offer" (2).

### **Tribute to *taan* singers/musicians**

Up to the time of independence and in the early 1970s, before Indians started to migrate in large numbers overseas, *Bhojpuri* was a well-spoken language and *taan* singing was perhaps the most popular cultural expression among Indians in Guyana. Today, 180 years after Indians arrived in Guyana we have lost the ability to speak our language and as a result *taan* singing is on life support. In neighboring Suriname, the smallest Indian child speaks fluent Bhojpuri and *taan* singing known as *baithak gana* there, is extremely popular with a multitude of outstanding young *kalaakaars* (artistes).

As we embark upon celebrations of 180 years of Indians in Guyana, I pay homage to my relatives and others, who purely out of their love of culture, fought valiantly with their *taan* singing to hold on to their language, music, identity and heritage. Talking about the demise of *taan* singing in Guyana brings tears to many of the few remaining artistes and musicians; the agonizing pain of witnessing the near disappearance of an important aspect one's own culture.

My paternal great grandmother and her daughter Sumintra were unlettered, but were outstanding *taan kalaakaars*, and I remember some folk songs from Uttar Pradesh they used to sing. My great grandmother used to sing *sohar* and dance in the Village *Mathiya* (Mandir) on occasions celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna and Rama. As a boy, I regularly visited my *Ajie* Sunimtra at No. 59 Village back-street. As soon as I arrived in front of their small house on stilts, my *Aja*, the grand old man, noticing me dismount from my bicycle and, looking in the direction of *Ajie* under the house, he would call, "*maiyaara dekho*" (mother look). When I respectfully greeted the dignified old man, after courtesy inquiries in Bhojpuri, he would say, "*Nanie Nana ka pakole*" (what did your Nanie and Nana cook). He knew that I grew up with my maternal grandparents and wanted me to partake of their food too. This, indeed, is another aspect of Indian culture that is on life-support. Under their small house were two hammocks made from *dhaan* (paddy) bags; my *Ajie* would lie in one

and I in the other, and she would sing short versions of melodious *taan* tunes to me and I would be transported to places and times unknown. The memories will stay with me until my time, too, comes.

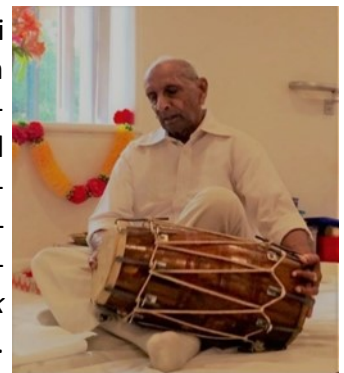
Not too long ago, just before she died, I visited my *Ajie* Sumintra who was in her 90s and still living at her village. All three of my *Puwah* (father's sisters) were on site and after some searching of her memory, she remembered me. When I asked her to sing, she rendered (and I recorded it):

*ho preetam pyaare tu kahaa basatuu hai*  
(dear darling, where have you been)  
*mohe nagariyaa batai jaa*  
(tell me in which in city have you gone)  
*mohe dagariya batai jaa*  
(tell me, are you on the peak of the hill)...

I feel so blessed to have had such experiences. I have gone to so many distant lands, places that my grandparents would never dream of, but whenever I hear *taan*, it takes me home, back to the village where my navel string is tied and where my idea of Indian culture was nurtured. That sweet legacy I inherited from them helped to make me into who I am. It connects me deeply to my roots and make my childhood memories as fresh as if it were only yesterday. Today one of the chords of Hindu culture is near extinction. Its loss will surely make "Arrival Day" poorer.

*Ajie* Sumintra's son, Deodat, who now lives in Aruba, told me during a conversation on November 11, 2016 that there was a very popular *taan* group at No. 59 Village in the 1960s and 70s led by Jodhan Seeratan (popularly known as Bhayaa). The name of the group was *Godmandali Sangeet Samaj*. Bhayaa used to live obliquely opposite No. 59 Village Primary School. He was a well-respected *taan* singer, harmonium player and the best *dhantaal* player in the area. Other eminent *taan* singers in the group included Bharat Das from No. 60 Village, Hansraj from No. 71 Village, Ramdass and Willy Joseph (Jung) from No. 59 Village, Ramroop and Jokulall from No. 69 Village, Antu from No. 64 Village, Bhopal and "Guttersmith" from No. 67 Village. The dholak players were Kabri from No. 65 Village, Cecil Karioka, and Haribudhu from No. 59 Village. I have heard live performances by Shri Bharat Das, Shri Bhayaa, Shri Hansraj, Shri Ramroop, and Shri Ramdass accompanied by Haribudhu on *dholak* and must say that they were all gifted men who had great respect in the whole Courentye coastline. The singers were blessed with gifted voice that touched low notes that can burst into a crescendo. The *harmonium*, *mandolin*, *dhantal* and *dholak* were instruments these men had mastery over.

I was also very fortunate to interview eminent *taan dholak* player Shri Sunat Sooklall, known as Sook on May 19, 2016. Sooklall Ji was born on February 28, 1926 (90 years old at the time) and was living at his daughter's residence in Boca Raton, Florida. He was in good health, active, and mentally sharp. He was from Delph Street, Cambellville, Guyana. His father was a well-known *dholak* player and he learnt the art from his father. He was in primary school at the time and after he finished his homework, he would practice playing the *dholak*. He said that he played *dholak* only for *taan* singers and they performed without charging any fees. Sometimes the sponsor of the event would give them a "small piece". He remembered the names of some of the *taan* singers as follows: Tillack



Shri Sunat Sooklall

(Port Mourant), James Babulall, Budhu (Lamaha Street; he was a Berbician), Sonny Singh (Cambellville), Taani Latchman (Cambellville), Ragbeer (Cambellville), "Very Best" (Kitty; he was a

top *taan* singer and that was his nick name; could not remember his correct name), Omar (Queenstown), Balgobinsingh Lalljee (Bhallu) (Port Maurant; he played for Bhallu both in Guyana and Florida), Boodram, and Gunwah (Mahaica). He said that all of them are dead now except for Bhallu.

Balgangadhar Tillack from Port Maurant was a legendary singer in British Guiana in the 1940s-50s. His birth name was Brijbasseer Tillack but was given the name “Balgangadhar” after the famous Indian freedom fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak, by a visiting dignitary in the late 1930s after he heard him sing Indian pro-independence songs. He was an expert in playing several instruments (*harmonium*, *sitar*, *saaranghi*, saxophone, flute) and had the ability to compose on the spot.

Other legendary *taan* singers were Paltu Das, Sakhawat, Balgobinsingh Lalljee (Bhallu) (Port Maurant), Balnain (Port Maurant), Harry Das, Tawara, Kissoon, Ghunwah (Mahaica), Kalush Budhu, Dasrath Mangru (Bath Settlement), Mohit Mangru (Bath Settlement), Evelyn Morgan (Cow Dam Canjie, East Coast Berbice), Vincent Morgan, Seapaul, Bharat Das (No. 60 Village), Rattan Kumarie (Mon Repos), Samaroo (Buxton), Khundan, Cecil Ramsaroop, Ramjeet (Tain), Rusik (Skeldon), Josey, Tailor Bisnauth Ramjattan (No. 47 Village), Ramroop (No. 68 village), Hansraj (No. 71 Village), Jokulall (No. 69 Village), Sudama (East Bank Demerara), Ramlakan (Grove), Reginald Rajaram Williams (Mocha), Roopan Kandool, Hari Das, Dave Kissoon, Kishun Kissoon, , Cecil Sinclair, Sahadeo ‘Suga’ Singh, Harripersaud, Gobin Ram (West Ruimveldt Housing Scheme), Betty Latchman, and many others. Each *taan* singer had unique abilities. For example, Dashrat Mangru had an amazing vocal range.

Top dholak players include Ramdhani (from Buxton front), Babooram, Janak, Rasool (from Lusignan), Samuel called Sam (from Delph Street, Cambellville), Sunat [Sugrim] Sooklall (from Delph Street, Cambellville), Rambarose, Twara, Sago, Tata, Haribudhu (from No. 59 village), Arjun, Samuel, and Rudy Sasenarine (Port Maurant), Droopad Persaud among several others. Shri Ramdhani is remembered as a great master of the *dholak*, but anyone who had the great fortune of witnessing the artistry of anyone of these players would attest to their genius.

### Recoding History

A *taan* singer, Shri James Babulall Ji, composed and sang the story of the murder in Stanleytown, New Amsterdam in the 1950s, of a five-year-old girl named Lilawattie. Baboolall realized that nobody would document for future generations, the murder of baby Lilawattie and the pain of her mother, Dularie, so he documented it using the medium of *taan*. Interestingly, the story of the murder of baby Lilawattie emerged in a Kaieteur News article published on July 5, 2009 titled “The sacrificial murders” written by Michael Jordan (3). Apparently, one Kathleen Fullerton, dreamt that a demon told her that there was Dutch gold buried in her backyard, but she could only get the gold if she sacrificed a child. A plan was hatched and baby Lilawattie was sacrificed. As suspicion grew her body was dumped in a nearby latrine, but it was eventually recovered. Here is sample from



*Legendary Balgobinsingh Lalljee singing taan and playing harmonium.*



*Top: left: Mohit Mangru (Cornet); center: Bharat Das (Mandolin); Right: Dasrath Mangru; Bottom: left: James Babulall (Dhantaal); center: Sansodhan Lalbiharie from Nickerie, Suriname. (Harmonium); Right: Babooram (Dholak)*

Babulall ji's original *taan* composition:

In the song "*Lilawattie ki kahani*" (the story of Lilawattie) Babulall Ji opens with the line:

*ye rho rahie mata Dularie apni beti ke yaad mey*  
(the crying mother Dularie remembers her daughter),  
*beti bechari margaye*  
(the murder of her poor daughter)

Babulall Ji continues:

*...bhaaiyo aur bhahino arey jara tu souch chalo apna dil mey dulare ke ghar mey...*  
(brothers and sisters let us feel the pain in our hearts of what has happened in the house of Dularie)  
*...arey Hindu jaati ab say tu ghar jawoo...*  
(she is a Hindu and henceforth let us go and visit her house to offer solidarity).

Babulall's song dates the murder of baby Lilawattie to January 1950.

### ***Call of the Taan Singer***

As in the case of James Babulall's song noted above in "*Lilawattie ki kahani*," *taan* singers utilized their skills in various ways in the form of poetry, philosophy, recording of history, talking back, and calling upon their people to educate themselves and take a stand for *dharma*, for justice and human dignity.

One of my favorite *taan* singers is the great Mohit Mangru. He has been a man of radiant brilliance. In one of his original compositions he added his signature to his teaching by inserting the line:

*Mohit Mangru ka kahana maano, jaago sone waalo...*  
(Mohit Mangru urges us to wake up from our slumber)  
*...dharma tumhaara...*  
(as part of your Dharma)  
*....larki larko ko Hindi seekhao...*  
(girls and boys learn Hindi)  
*...are jaago sone walo...*  
(oh dare! wake up from your slumber)

That is illustrative of the call of the *taan* singer. Without our language and our cultural identity, we are like the proverbial monkey in Guyana, who, when the chief monkey in England or America puts on his cap, we blindly follow.

### ***Not Ustaad, but Pandit***

When eminent *dholak* artiste, Shri Ramnarine 'Rudy' Sasenarine passed away in February 2012, many people referred to him as *Ustaad*. That was an injustice to the great man. I objected to it on the discussion platform, Caribbean Hindu Network (CHN). I stated that I was surprised at the use of the word "*Ustaad*" for the notable Ramnarine who was a Hindu. The title "*Ustaad*" is not for Hindu musicians; it is for Muslims and is common among Muslims in India, and in many Muslim countries.

Traditionally, male Hindustani musicians/singers of repute are addressed by their peers as "*Pandit*". *Pandit* is not supposed to be the title one gives to himself and especially not for the conduct of rituals as an occupation, which is *Purohit* (Priest).

Hindustani singers and musicians of repute and scholarship are given the title *Pandit* by their peers. Thus, we have *Pandit* Ravi Shankar (Sitar), *Pandit* Ronu Majumdar (flute), the legendary *Pandit* Bhimsen Joshi (sangeet), etc. Similarly, the Muslim musicians of repute are addressed as "*Ustaad*". Thus, we have *Ustad* Amjad Ali Khan (Sarod), *Ustad* Zakir Hossain (Tabla), etc. I recommend that we dignify the work of our reputable Hindu *taan* singers and musicians with the appropriate honors. A fitting start would be to say Pandit Balgangadhar Tillack (*taan* singer), Pandit James Babulall (*taan* singer), Pandit Balgobinsingh Lalljee (*taan* singer), Pandit Ramdhanie (*dholak* player), Pandit Dasrath Mangru (*taan* singer), Pandit Mohit Mangru (*taan* singer), Pandit Sunat Sooklall (*dholak* player), etc. I use the term Pandit here in the true Sanskrit sense to recognize a person's mastery of his art; not in the prevailing "*lagu bhagu*" sense, and, also because *Ustaad* is not appropriate for Hindu artistes; it is for Muslim artistes only.

### ***Factors contributing to the demise of taan***

Inabilities to comprehend and speak Hindi and its relevant dialects, of course, is the critical factor in the demise of *taan* in Guyana. However, in Guyana, politics, "Pandits" and power played a substantial role as well. The "Pandit" hegemony of Hindu evolutionary practice in Guyana cannot be underestimated. Pandits were aligned to political parties and were silent spectators as spoken Indian languages eroded to death. This inaction, despite the fact, that across Guyana, villagers organized village-level unofficial Hindi schools to teach the language. At Tagore Memorial High School at No. 63 Village, which started as a private school, Hindi was an official part of the curriculum and outstanding teachers taught the subject. Unfortunately, the school was nationalized by Guyana's government and Hindi was dislodged.

Politicians in Guyana have a long and sordid history of giving themselves and their comrades national honors, but to date no *taan* singer or musician was ever given any national award as opposed to African Guyanese artistes. Indian politicians should not be excused for this injustice upon hundreds of *taan* singers and musicians. It is a great shame that in Guyana the politicians promote Mashramani and Carnival, both African Guyanese culture, while *taan* and all forms of local Indian music have been excluded from national life of the country as exemplified by their absence from radio and television programs.

The educated, elitist Indians, V.S. Naipaul's "mimic men", divorced from their cultural heritage, had no feeling for *taan* as an art form, and the Indian-based political party, the PPP, with its historic Marxist orientation interpreted religion and culture as poisons of society. They and their affiliates such as the Dharmic Sabha and Indian Arrival Committee have reduced the rich diverse Indian cultural expressions in Guyana to Bollywood song and dance culture.

"Pandits" in Guyana were not *taan* singers and there was tension between these two groups to such an extent that all Hindu *taan* singers were relegated to *Ustaads* (Muslims). In the good old days, "Pandits" were capable speakers of Hindi and had mastery of *Ramayana* by Tulsi Das and had no problem accommodating *taan* singers/musicians. There was balance between the "Pandits" or *Purohits* and *taan* singers in the practice of village-level Hinduism. During Hindu programs, it was an unwritten tradition that *taan* singers in the community had key roles. That was also how singing and musical talents from the villages were nurtured. With the passage of time, the typical *taan* singer because of the nature of the art form was better at language compared to the typical "Pandit"

(Priest), who is chagrined when people question the legitimacy of the “Pandit” title. As “Pandits” lost the ability to speak Hindi and comprehend Sanskrit, they relied on English transliterations, and an unseen barrier was erected to protect against conversations in Hindi by the old *taanees*, a technique to retain the bully pulpit and control the event. This insecurity has led to many “Pandits” having their own bhajan/kirtan groups, which eventually further eroded the nurturing of *taan* talents from villages. Today, unfortunately, we have the “singing Pandit” phenomenon to cover for lack of Hindu textual knowledge, a far cry from the old days when it was against the status of a “Pandit” to sing when he was hired to “read” and “explain” the book.

### ***Attempt to keep taan alive***

Language is the foundation of culture. Once a group loses its language, it loses its living medium of expression, its links to the past and to the future, and probably its ability to survive. After 180 years, *taan* singing and music is in a state of *mora ghabarana* (troubling hearts) because it is almost dead in Guyana. However, there are still several people across Guyana and the diaspora, including young people, who are valiantly trying to foster *taan* singing and music. It is time for bold initiatives to be taken to water and tend to the seeds of *taan* that has been planted in our country so that once again sweet and wholesome fruits in the form of *taan kalaakaars* would emerge.

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*Picture of some legendary taan singers and musicians from Guyana.*

# From Hut Temples to Mandirs: What Meaning?

Ramesh Gampat<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

From the few “hut-temples” (Bronkhurst 1888: 79) of early Indian immigrants, today numerous *Mandirs*, larger, some elegantly designed and constructed, grace and dot the coastal areas of Guyana, from Crabhook Creek in Berbice to Charity on the Essequibo Coast. Numerous temples built by Guyanese Hindus are also present in North America. There are an estimated 600,000 Guyanese Indians of all religions inside and outside of Guyana and an estimated 400 Guyanese *Mandirs*. This means there is one *Mandir* for every 1,500 Guyanese Indians (Endnote 1). *Mandir*-density is probably higher in Guyana than outside of the country, but I do not have the necessary evidence to support this conjecture (Endnote 2).

At least up the 1950s or so, temples were more than places of social gatherings. More importantly, they were places of selfless worship, high learning, social service to the community and planning for community development. The argument in this paper is that many *Mandirs* have become an instrument of exploitation despite the fact that they are involved in organizing community events and are the most visible places of Guyanese Hindu worship. They are undoubtedly important cultural symbols but less so than six or seven decades ago. Today *Mandirs*, especially those in North America, are managed more for the benefit of *Pandits* than the ordinary Hindu folks. Many *Mandirs* are contested sites: an arena of battle for control of Hindus, bank accounts and property, which sometimes spills over into the court. There are, in fact, several instances when disputes ended up in the court. Moreover, and unlike the days old, *Pandits*, especially those in North America, have their own following, which is sometimes the result of a breakaway faction of a temple dispute. Several *Mandirs* owe their origin to such disagreements – that some *Mandirs* arise from discord and continues to perpetuate discord is itself troubling. We seem to have become cultish, which is a dramatic move away from earlier times when there were few, if any, disputes over temples. It appears that the proliferation of temples and *Pandits*, and thus *Brahmanism*, is associated with thinking and behaving resembling those of a cult. *Brahmanism*, cults and control of *Mandirs* have conferred enormous power unto *Pandits* (see my paper on *Fall of Sanatana Dharma, Rise of Plantation Hinduism* in the current publication, “180 Years of Indians in Guyana: 1838-2018”).

## Short Brief of the Origin of Hindu Temples

During the Vedic period, the crucible of India’s spiritual beginnings, people believed that Brahman was all-pervading and omnipresent (Endnote 3). Among other things, this means one could pray anywhere and worship any visible part of nature as God. There is a *shloka* in the *Yajurveda* that

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ramesh Gampat was born in Essequibo. He is an Economist, who has worked for almost three decades with the United Nations Development Programme. While stationed in Asia, he was a member of the team that prepared four Asia-Pacific Human Development Reports and is the co-editor (with Anuradha Kati Rajivan) of a two-volume book titled *Perspectives on Corruption and Human Development*, which was published by Macmillan (Delhi) in 2009. He is the author of *Guyana: From Slavery to the Present. Volume 1. Health System and Guyana: From Slavery to the Present. Volume 2. Major Diseases*, both of which were published by Xlibris (2015). Dr. Gampat has also published academic papers on inflation, poverty, international trade, human development, gender and corruption. He was a tutor in Economics at the University of Guyana (1981-1983) and an academic faculty member (2005-2006) of the United Nations Development Programme’s Virtual development Academy, hosted by Jones International University.

ends with an astonishingly penetrative question: “*Who is the Deity we shall worship with our offerings?*” Since the One without a second cannot be comprehended by the human mind (the faculty of reasoning), which grasps for something to hold on to, human instinctively worshiped all of nature. Thus, was that One seen as the Many or, as the *R̥g-Veda* beautifully puts: *Ekam Sadviprā bahudhā vadanti* —“that which exists is One: sages call it by various names.” The “many,” according to the *R̥g-Veda*, tells of the manifestation of *devas* in terms of *ra* and *satya*. And so the splendid creation was worshipped as *Ushas*, *Maruts*, *Saraswati*, *Indra* and *Vayu*. *Agni* was the priest, the go-between, who bridged the mortal life and immortality.

In time a sacrificial spot — *yajna vedi* — where people kindled a fire to worship *Brahman* by placing their offerings into the fire came into existence. The sacrificial spot was perhaps the first idea of a temple. Sri Aurobindo (1985) tells us that the sacrificial ritual was transformed into rigid codes of obscurantism surrounding the *yajna vedi* and consequently the temple. This was a fine example of traditions obscuring spirituality and marks the beginning of greater reliance on *Sm̐rtis* than *Śruti*, beliefs than direct experience (*anubhūti*) of truth. The *Mandir*, *devalayam*, *devasthanam* or temple probably began as a shed erected around the object of worship: a *murti* of the deity, which is not the same the “image” of Indologists and other critics of *Vedānta*. Archaeologists have unearthed temples of the *Puranic* age that contained *murtis* of divinities. For example, ruins of temples dedicated to Snakarashana and Vasudeva at Nagri near Chittoor are said to belong to 350-250 B.C.E. The use of the principle of *murtis* of the Vedic period led to the flourishing of Hindu temples during the *Puranic* age, which means that the modern idea of a temple reaches back to no more than 2,500 years ago. Temples did not exist in the Vedic period (1500-500 B.C.E). Temples are a gift of the *Puranic* age, a gift that is increasingly being transformed into an instrument of subjection and away from the original intention: high culture and an inspiration and aid to total freedom from the body-mind complex.

Interestingly, after outdoor and separate temples have been developed, an important Vedic idea began to take hold: Vedas do speak of ritualism. Somehow this was interpreted to mean that people should pray in a place that was separate from their dwellings, a place where the world did not intrude. This was a private place, which led to another innovation: to the open-air fire sacrifices was added the closed-door worship, which gave rise to a *puja* room or an “altar” in one’s house. By the time of the two great epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, temple worship had taken roots in Bharat (India). As we entered recorded history, there was a keen competition among Hindus, Jains and Buddhists to construct bigger, more artistic places of worship. In the course of this evolution, the sacred became entwined with the secular and many Hindus became confused, intellectually lazy and ignorant. It went further with Guyanese Hindus. After the “synthesis,” which began around 1870s and democratized Hinduism, two unfortunate, and perhaps unintended consequence, emerged: the extraordinary reliance upon *Pandits* and the dumbing down of the Hindu mind (Endnote 4).

### Ownership of Temples

This is a timely issue, but one over which there is much timidity, inertia, confusion, litigation and, of course, vested interest driven by selfish motives. *Mandirs*, essentially a cultural expression of a timeless culture, are communal places of worship at least in the Caribbean and the Caribbean Hindu Diaspora. They are, in the main, mostly built with funds collected from the Hindu *samaj* (community). Interestingly, there is greater cooperation in the construction of a *Mandir* than in running it; the tussle is often among the *Pandits* once the *Mandir* becomes a functional cultural expression. The critical question, then, becomes: should ownership of *Mandirs* be separated from their management? There are, of course, two answers to this question: no and yes. These give

rise to theoretical two modes or models of ownership: communal/*Pandit* and non-profit organization. Unfortunately, the legal status of a *Mandir* is a highly guarded secret privy to only a selected few. The tragedy is that ordinary Hindus have accepted the secret ways of *Mandirs*, which is why we do not question how a *mandir* is managed, periodically demand information on its financial status and regular meetings.

It is beyond question that ownership status of *Mandirs* affects their construction, maintenance, management, cultural use and bank accounts, all of which exert a heavy influence over the Hindu *samaj*. Indeed, more than *Brahmanism* it is *Pandit* control of *Mandirs* that enables them to control their Hindu flock. As far as I can tell, the ownership of Caribbean Hindu *Mandirs* is shrouded in secrecy because they afford privileges, wealth and power over Hindus to the narrow class of people, mostly men, who are arrogant, ignorant, mean and corrupt. Not to be downplayed is the fact that ownership confers a license gratis upon this class of owners to fleece and exploit the Hindu *samaj*. In general, Caribbean Hindus, wherever they are on this planet, are intellectually lazy when it comes to reading and studying their own philosophy. Is not for want of an education because the majority of them are highly literate. Something else is holding them back. I speculate that the culprit is the way Hinduism has been preached, explained and taught to them and practiced: like “nancy story,” as my father used to say.

### ***Communal and Pandit Models***

Since *mandirs* are constructed, more often than not, with funds collected from the community, then, logically and morally, the community should own them. This form of ownership raises an important legal issue: who is the community and how is it defined? The legal codes of many countries require names for registration and legal possession of any property. In a court of law, the names of the people that appear on the deed are the owners. I am not too sure about how the registration of *Mandirs* is done in Guyana, Trinidad, the US, UK, etc. At least here in the US, some *Mandirs* are registered as non-profit organizations, which have a tax-free status and a board of directors.

If the owners are representatives, not necessarily *Pandits*, of the community, then the *Mandir* may be deemed communally owned. But this leaves open the issue of how the representatives are determined. In any case, the representatives are in a position to control the construction, maintenance, management and cultural use of the *Mandir*, and *Mandir* bank account(s). Or they could delegate this responsibility to a board, which reports periodically to the *samaj*, but, of course, this rarely, if ever, happens. Very few members of any given Guyanese *Mandir* in North America have even the faintest idea of the size of the *Mandir's* bank account.

On the other hand, if the *Mandirs* are registered in the name of *Pandits*, then *Pandits* are the owners and controllers of their *Mandirs*, regardless of whether they provide the money to purchase the land and building or construct a *Mandir* from scratch. Such *Pandits* are in a position to control the construction, maintenance, management, cultural use of the *Mandir*, as well as its the bank account(s). *Pandits* can, and do, hold the community hostage: the community becomes a milking cow, which is fine example of the ability of a *Pandit* to control and fleece his Hindu flock. The community contributes its time and resources, including money, but has little, if any, say in the affairs of the *mandir*. To put it in the language of politics, this is taxation – extraction - without accountability, with little, if any, responsibility to the community.

### ***The Non-Profit Model***

A non-profit organization (abbreviated as NPO), also known as a not-for-profit organization, does not issue stock shares or distribute its surplus funds to owners or shareholders. Instead, these

funds are used to help achieve its goals. Examples of NPOs include charities, trade unions, foundations, endowments and public arts organizations. While not-for-profit organizations can and do earn a profit, more accurately termed a surplus (donations from the Hindu *samaj* in the case of mandirs), such earnings/donations must be retained by the organization for its self-preservation, expansion, or other aspects of its plans. NPOs have controlling members or boards. Many have paid staff including management, while others employ unpaid volunteers and even executives who work without compensation. In the US, nonprofit organizations are formed by filing bylaws and/or articles of incorporation in the state where they expect to operate. The act of incorporating creates a legal entity that enables it to be treated as a corporation by law and to enter into business dealings, form contracts, and own property as any other individual or for-profit corporation may do.

The two major types of nonprofit organization are membership and board-only. A membership organization elects the board of Directors, Board of Governors or Board of Trustees, and has regular meetings and power to amend the bylaws. A board-only organization typically has a self-selected board, and a membership whose powers are limited to those delegated to it by the board. A board-only organization's bylaws may even state the organization does not have any membership, although the organization's literature may refer to its donors as "members." As far as I know, Caribbean Hindu *Mandirs*, regardless of where they are located, do not explicitly follow the non-profit model. In fact, many might be registered as non-profit organizations merely as a legal convenience that permits their "owners" almost unlimited control. That is, they are legally non-profit organizations, but functionally private entities.

To my mind, the NPO offers an ideal ownership-functional model for mandirs. While ownership presumably resides with the Hindu *samaj*, this model legally mandates a management board, periodic elections of executives and periodic meetings. Depending upon the composition of the board, none of the stakeholders - pandits, the general public or influential members of the public – may be able to exert undue influence on the affairs of the *Mandir*.

The major issues confronting us today, as I see it, is not so much the desired form of ownership and control of *Mandirs*; this can be settled rather easily if the will to do so exists. The critical issue is a more mundane and contentious one: how to change the present ownership structure and control of *Mandirs* without throwing the Hindu *samaj* into chaos? The vested interests of pandits will ensure that the *mandir* status quo is preserved. Some pandits do not even have defend any challenge. Their lobby, which is made of ordinary Hindus, including relatives and friends, does their work. For us, religion encompasses politics, economics, public relations and theatrics and a little spirituality as veneer.

### **Wealth of Caribbean Mandirs**

I begin with a cautionary note: this is an arch-chair and perhaps conservative exercise based on assumptions that are probably unrealistic. But it is a start, and I dare say that the methodology is perhaps more rigorous than the estimate of wealth it generates (because the data is weak). The most salient point from the estimating exercise is that the wealth of our *Mandirs* is not much compared to that of Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques or even temples owned and run by Indians from India.

In a world of scarce resources, competition and a settled mode of living and livelihood, wealth is a central issue and people, regardless of ethnicity, place of dominion or religion, are acquisitive creatures. This is why corruption, for example, is a central feature of human societies – evolution may have primed our brains for this sort of unethical behavior, if it has survival value. Contrary to

popular perception, the acquisition of wealth is not debarred in Hinduism, so long as it is done within a moral framework as defined by the four *purushartas*. Hinduism is not an other-worldly religion as critics have posited but a religion that gives its follower total freed to live, work and play in both the secular and sacred worlds.

What constitutes the wealth of a typical *Mandir*? I posit the view that the wealth of a *Mandir* comprises those assets and liabilities to which a monetary value can be assigned by the market. Net wealth is thus assets minus liabilities. Assets include building and other physical constructions, natural assets (land), vehicles, cookware and related items, books, musical instruments, *murtis* and other religious items in the *Mandir*, bank accounts and investments. Liabilities include loans, accounts payable, mortgages, deferred revenues and accrued expenses. It is an extremely difficult exercise to arrive at an estimate of “*Mandir* wealth” for the simple reason that data on assets and liabilities are not available – they are a guarded secret known only to the chosen few. Liabilities will be omitted because, unlike buildings, they do not have a physical and tangible presence. Based on my own knowledge and conversation with others from Queens, New York, the loan on many mandirs have been paid off already, while, given the nature of mandir operations, other categories of liabilities are minimal. For these reasons, we proceed on the assumption that Caribbean Hindu *Mandirs* have zero liabilities. Any estimate of mandir wealth is further compounded by the absence of data on the number of Caribbean mandirs, regardless of where they are located. The indicative estimate of mandir wealth is thus limited to assets only.

Finally, the estimate is for North America, Guyana and Trinidad only, since we do not have any estimate of the number of Caribbean Hindu mandirs in the rest of the world, their assets and liabilities.

#### ***Northern American Caribbean Mandirs***

Bank Accounts: About fifteen years ago, an NY *Pandit*, who runs a *Mandir* in his basement, told me that his *Mandir* had over \$40,000 in its bank account, and, interestingly, that the *Mandir* was registered as an NPO. If we assume that there are 52 “*Mandir* functions” per year and that each function nets \$100 per function, then the yearly “income” of the mandir is \$5,200. The bank account of this *Mandir* should be in the vicinity of \$118,000 [ $\$78,000 + (5,200 \times 15)$ ] since it was at least 15 years ago that this mandir had \$40,000 in its account]. Of course, this is a rough guesstimate, and there are certainly *Mandirs* with considerably more money in their bank accounts and others with considerably less. Taking the uneven distribution into account, I think it is reasonable to assume that each Caribbean *Mandir* in North America has about \$115,000 in its account. Note that all amount in this paper are un United States dollar.

According to the data available to me, there are about 80 Caribbean Hindu *Mandirs* in New York and most of them are in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens. About another 40 are in Florida and around 20 more are located in other states, including Georgia, Texas and Minnesota. In sum, there at least 140 Caribbean Hindu mandirs in the United States of America and another 100 in Canada. This amounts to around 240 Caribbean Hindu *Mandirs* North America. Given this assumption, the value of their bank accounts would be \$27.6 million ( $\$115,000 \times 240$ ).

Mandir Property: Absent the requisite data, a value must be imputed to the physical property of a typical mandir. This is a tricky issue, since there are “basement” *Mandirs* and “independent” (a separate building that has a basement) *Mandirs*, and both varieties come in various sizes. On the conservative side, assume that thirty percent (72) of the *Mandirs* basement *Mandirs* and the rest – 168 or 70 percent – are independent *Mandirs*. Further, given the state of real estate markets, assume that a typical “independent” *Mandir* in North America is values at \$350,000 (land and build-

-ing), and that a typical “basement” mandir is valued at zero dollars because it is part of a person’s home. With these assumptions, the combined value of *Mandirs* would be \$58.8 million ( $\$350,000 \times 168$ ).

Mandir Contents: This relates to the estimate of the contents in a typical *Mandir*: *murtis* and other religious stuffs, cookware and related materials, books, musical instruments. Of course, there is no way of arriving at a value. However, let us assume, reasonably, that the value of these things amounts to \$10,000 per *Mandir*. This gives a combined value of \$2.4 million ( $\$10,000 \times 240$ ).

To sum it up then, we have:

Bank accounts - \$27.6 million

Natural and Physical property - \$58.8 million

Contents of Mandir - \$2.4 million

Summing over these three items yields a total value of \$88.8 million as the wealth of *Mandirs* in North America. I believe that this is a conservative figure and is thus not meant to be definitive in any way. Rather, it is indicative: relatively high but uncertain in amount.

### ***Mandirs in Guyana and Trinidad***

In general, *Mandirs* in these two countries are more modest in size, architecture, contents, and bank accounts. Indeed, I doubt whether most mandirs in these countries have bank accounts. For these reasons, it is better to attempt to guesstimate the value of the mandir building (physical property) and land (natural property). On the issue of liabilities, I think it is reasonable to assume that these are zero. Most, if not all, *Mandirs* in Guyana have no debt or owed anyone or entity.

Based on my own knowledge and conversation with people on the Essequibo Coast, the value of *Mandir* physical property in Guyana is extremely modest, probably no more than \$5,000 on the average. The land on which the mandir is located, on the other hand, has a higher value. I would say about US\$30,000. That is, the value of a typical *Mandir* in Guyana is about \$35,000 and I would assume slightly more in Trinidad because of the relative scarcity of land – perhaps about \$50,000.

Estimated Number of *Mandirs* in Guyana: 200

Estimated Wealth of *Mandirs* in Guyana: \$7.0 million ( $\$35,000 \times 200$ )

Estimated Number of *Mandirs* in Trinidad: 150

Estimated Wealth of *Mandirs* in Trinidad: \$7.5 million ( $\$50,000 \times 150$ )

My guesstimate of wealth of Caribbean *Mandirs* in Guyana, Trinidad and North America is thus: ( $\$88.8 + 7.0 + 7.5$ ) million = \$103.3 million.

This is peanuts compared to the treasure trove recently discovered at the 16<sup>th</sup> century Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple in Kerala, India: \$22 billion! What is astonishing about this vast Indian “*Mandir* wealth” is not its magnitude, but the fact that the family that managed the *Mandir* did not loot it. If Caribbean *Pandits* were to adhere to even a shed of the moral and ethical values of the Padmanabhaswamy temple family, Hinduism in the Caribbean would be on sounder footing. We cannot resist separating wealth from *dharma*.

### **Secular and Sacred Worlds**

The title of this sub-section refers to the tension between the “Mandir culture” and “lifestyle culture,” or the world outside of mandirs. Submitted by a member of the CHN, the question was

framed this way: “Why do most Hindus practice Hindu culture only in the Mandir, while preferring a Western or Creole lifestyle in the wider community?” Given the dynamism and adaptability of Hinduism, I suggest that this is an incorrect way of framing and analyzing the issue. That is, the two sets of cultures do not exist in a vacuum. They are not mutually exclusive but mix and intermingle.

*Mandirs* are the most visible and tangible sites for the expression of Hindu tradition and culture. I take “mandir culture,” to mean the way in which mandirs are managed and the behavior expected once in a mandir. I interpret “lifestyle culture” to mean the adoption and practice of “Western” or “Creole” culture in all other aspects of life beyond the narrow confines of the *Mandir* – at home, in schools, the workplace, parks, on the trains, etc. On the surface, it appears that a typical Caribbean Hindu lives a dual cultural life. S/he is a Hindu in the *Mandir* once or twice a week and perhaps somewhat confused as to his identity outside of the *Mandir*. But this is a false this cultural duality – the practice of a different set of cultural values inside and outside of the mandir. For my purpose, it suffices to say that culture, *Mandir* or “lifestyle,” is the informal shared values, norms, meanings, and behaviors that characterize human societies and that it is passed down from generation to generation (through memes, not genes).

Since this cultural dichotomy is present everywhere (in the Caribbean, North America, Europe, Asia), there must be some common underlying feature. That feature I refer to as modernization or what some Marxists would call cultural imperialism, but it is not necessary to get embroiled in terminology. Caribbean Hindus live in mixed cultural spaces and ethnically plural societies marked by a clattering of tongues, fierce competition for public space, education, jobs, resources and access to powerful people. The injection Hindu culture, tradition and values in an already inhabited and keenly contested space cannot but play second fiddle. In an age of hedonistic materialism that has conquered the world, the shallower culture wins the cultural competition for the simple reason that that it is more attractive, intuitive, loose and requires less effort from its adherents or potential adherents. The pull factors – the swallow factor – is enormous and is most difficult for both kids and adults to escape. It is well-known that a Guyanese changes his thinking, behavior, manner of speaking and even adjust his moral compass after living in the US for about six months. To put it another way, materialism attracts more easily than non-materialism despite the pretense of a being a robust Hindu.

The rapid spread of globalization and massive international migration have had a negative impact on traditional cultures, including Hindu culture. Globalization - economic development in essence - has a tendency to render borders porous, and thus erode culture, by creating relative material abundance without a dharmic foundation: expanding desires and wants backed by the willingness and ability to satisfy them. Never before were we so well-off and better equipped to provide for ourselves, children and care for elderly parents. Yet material affordability is not an unmitigated blessing; it has a cost, which anchors us at the sensory level and makes the human heart hard and cold. The loss of empathy seems to be a concomitant – or perhaps a cost - of economic progress. The transformation begins from childhood for we raise our children to believe everything comes easily, that there is not much merit to sacrifice, that the acquisition of knowledge does not require tapas (the internet is just a finger-tip away), that high character is not a goal in life. We pamper our children with whatever they wish and without conditions. Moreover, when they do something good, even remotely so, they are rewarded, but no penalty is imposed for misbehavior. Little wonder children come to think that sacrifice is unnecessary and, therefore, have little value for long and hard struggle.

Why is this so? Because parents, from some combination of love and the desire to be left alone, lavish upon children whatever they wish to keep them at bay. Work consumes most of us and leaves little time for proper guidance of and advice to our children, many of whom are basically left to their own devices. Many parents consume their precious little spare time themselves (parties, friends, shopping, rest, chores, etc.), instead of investing a portion on their children. We forget, apparently, that young minds must be molded, disciplined and grounded in culture; otherwise, they become wild and dangerous. Obsessed with material things, the child is carried away by sensory desires and gets tightly attached to the fruits of action (Endnote 5). Before long the child's vision becomes clouded and its time horizon truncated as s/he labors under the tyranny of the immediate present to satisfy never-ending desires. Short-termism and expanding desires colonize the young mind and fix it squarely in the domain of hedonistic materialism, which disrespects the planet and poses an enormous environmental hazard.

International migration is a sharp cultural eraser. The terminology is apt since such movements of people, whatever the cause, uproot them from their own cultural milieu and insert them into an unfamiliar one, possibly in a more developed country. Once in their new "home," de facto but subtle and persistent forces push them to "do as the Romans do when in Rome." Since most migration is from poor to rich countries where the pressure to conform is high, non-western cultural erosion is an ongoing phenomenon. It is estimated that the immigrant's culture is significantly eroded three to four generations after relocation, including loss of the native language. Indians in the Caribbean bear testimony to the veracity of this observation, and Dr. Somdat Mahabir's article on taan in this publication is a fine example of the negating and destructive influence of cultural imperialism. Few Indian Guyanese speak Hindi, although most of us know numerous Hindi words. Most interestingly, we continue to love and listen to Hindu songs even though we rarely understand the meaning of the songs.

I have a vivid recollection that will not be erased. When I was based in Sri Lanka, where I worked as an Economist with the United Nations, I had thousands of Hindi songs and bhajans, as well as Bhagavadgītā and some Upaniṣhads (the latter two in Sanskrit) on my computer. Once in my apartment, I normally played my music but was not aware that it was so loud. One Saturday morning, two Indian females (from India), who lived in the same apartment complex but on higher floors, knocked on my door. Before I could have said "come in" they were already in my living room. "What beautiful and enchanting songs. Haunting and captivating," one of them said. Before I could respond, the other said, "are you Indian?" "Yes, I am but by heritage, not birth." They looked puzzled and then I explained Indian immigration to the West Indies. "Do you speak Hindi?" "No," I said. "Then how come you listen to Hindi songs?" For a moment I thought it was a silly, perhaps trick, question. "I have been listening to Hindi songs all my life," I said, "and do understand in a general way the meaning of some songs." Then female who started the discussion said, "I think I understand. He may not know the meaning of the lyric but loves the music!" That was the truth, but these songs were part of our connection, however tenuous, with the culture of my ancestors. We may have lost the language, the outward expression, but the cultural connection still exists at a deeper level.

Strictly conceived, the *Mandir* and the wider community – “lifestyle culture” - are two different worlds, characterized by different cultures, people, resources, opportunities and responsibilities. Each world has its own biases, demands a different behavior and have different expectations, but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. At a minimum, a certain “cultural element” exists and connects the two “worlds” that can impede or, more likely, promote progress, social, economic and spiritual. Translated, this means that success in the “community” world could rarely be achieved if one practices “*Mandir*” culture there, particularly so given the materialistic orientation of this considerably larger public space. Success in this “community” world demands absorption and practice of its ethos. It is a far more assertiveness, a keenly competitive world that demands internalization of its *gesinnung*, to use a German word, its temper and disposition. The world outside of the *Mandir* is a melding pot that churns out cosmopolitan citizens, who share important elements of a broad, invasive and aggressive culture. I am not lambasting such a culture; just saying that conformity is a crucial element of any survival strategy of immigrants. That is why we should not lock ourselves in a dichotomous choice: “mandir” or “lifestyle” culture. There must be some adaptation, some blending, of the two worlds where we must simultaneously live. We must live and work in both world but with dharma as our guide and teacher. That is the only way to high character development and spiritual growth, which will ensure the flourishing of Hinduism in an environment where most the inhabitants are not Hindus. If Hinduism appear as a stagnant culture, that is because we have equated Hinduism with its beliefs and stultifying traditions. Hinduism is dynamic, accommodating, living. It is not written in stone: that is what Bhagavan Krishna told Arjuna in *Bhagavadgītā*.

Survival in a rapidly changing and increasingly smaller world – connectivity compresses both time and space - demands that “mandir” and “lifestyle” culture cannot exist as separate worlds. They intersect, connect, influence each other in myriad feedback loops. The world outside the *Mandir* dwarfs the one inside the mandir; it is an increasingly competitive, resource-scare and overcrowded world. In this open world, population is expected to reach 9.8 billion in 2050, up from 7.6 billion today. It is a world where wars will be fought over resources such as water and land, and where environmental catastrophe and frightening health hazards loom on the horizon. The *Mandir* world is too puny to take on common and looming tragedies; it is not equipped to fight these evils, nor is this the purpose of mandirs. Cultural isolation is a recipe for annihilation, which is why it is important for parents and the larger community to inculcate both secular and Hindu values and culture into their offspring, but not in a way that will disadvantage them in the real world. Both secular and sacred education are important, and the successful person would traverse both worlds effortlessly.

### **Growing Trend: Males Prefer not to Attend Mandirs**

I think there are two major reasons for this sad and unfortunate phenomenon, the revealed preference of Hindu males to stay away from mandirs: evolutionary and historical.

#### *Evolutionary*

Male and female brains are wired differently. While there are numerous differences that begin as early as just 26 weeks of pregnancy, male brains are characterized by systemizing tendencies and female brains by empathizing tendencies. Systemizing tendencies is the drive to analyze, explore and construct systems. Males are thus more likely to figure out how things work or to extract rules that govern the behavior of a system. Empathizing tendencies is the drive to identify another person’s emotion and thoughts, and to respond to them with an appropriate emotion. Empathizing occurs when we feel an appropriate emotional reaction in response to the other person’s emotions. On the average, women are better than men at sensing another person’s emotional state

and intentions; often they feel other peoples' emotions as their own. The fact that women have a heightened need for connection to other human beings, is, in broader terms, a mammalian trait (Baron-Cohen 2003; Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004). That is why, for example, females have a lasting functional advantage over males in language skills (Anderson 2006). These and other brain differences between the sexes endow males with a tendency to boredom more quickly and more easily. The male is more restless, and his brains switches off more easily than that of his sister: that is why women are the preferred employees for assembly line jobs.

Despite their cultural significance, *Mandirs* have become places of boredom; they are uninspiring, unchallenging, presided over by *Pandits* who drone unintelligible platitudes, preach sermons that make little sense, are illogical and inconsistent with real life experiences. One reason for this is the mediocrity of *Pandits*, many of whom are intellectually challenged. This puts the human male off quickly, but human females are better equipped to endure dry and uninteresting sermons. Part of the solution is, of course, to educate *Pandits* to enable them to conduct intelligent discourses on Hinduism and to be able to satisfy the curious and scientific mind of youngsters. Note that I do not wish to paint all *Pandits* with the same brush: there are honest, bright and inspiring one, but the majority are not in this league. Evolution and tradition, with the latter bordering on exploitation, have primed males for positions of authority, even if they are intellectually and spiritually inferior to females. But nature gets its revenge: considerably more females than males go to *Mandirs* to listen to male *Pandits*!

### **Historical**

The tendency of males to stay away from *Mandirs* has historical roots, at least as far as the phenomenon relates to the Caribbean (Guyana and Trinidad in particular). Throughout Indian immigration, especially the early years, males dominated for the simple reason that they could better withstand the rigors of plantation life in an unfamiliar land, among unfamiliar and unfriendly people. Of the 396 Indians who came to the colony in 1838 for a three-year stint, only three were women. When immigration to the colony resumed in 1844, the number of women increased to 12 for every 100 men. From 1845, when immigration was taken over by the colonial Government, the figure moved up to 18 but fluctuated on a yearly basis, albeit with an upward trend, which is why it averaged 32 during the period 1845-1870. After 1870, the law prescribed that the "indenture sex ratio" should be at least 40 women per 100 men, which was generally met. "This proportion [the gender ratio] was fixed by the Colonial Office as a minimum, in order to ensure that the large disproportion of the sexes among recruits of earlier periods, might be somewhat corrected. Even so, the disparity in numbers between female and male emigrants remained large" (Bisnauth 2000).

Grave sex imbalance led to all kinds of moral indiscretions and some of the most heinous crimes in Caribbean history. If anything, Indian immigration to Guyana and Trinidad illustrated the degrading and dehumanizing effects of being suddenly cut off from families, friends, familiar landscapes, sights, sounds and scents, as well as the extent to which sex hormones pushed the human male to wreck his moral compass. Most Indians came to the Caribbean in the prime of their life: at the average age of 22 years (Hill 1919), when sex hormones are running riot. Coupled with the fact that families were separated (assigned to different plantations) and that immigrants had little spare time for cultural activities, this placed a serious constraint on the flourishing of Hinduism. At that point in time, too, to mitigate the pains, social instability and possibly violence against the British, the colonial master sold rum in abundance and cheaply. The men drank like fish, became addicted, suffered mental health issues and many abandoned their familial responsibilities (Gampat 2015a; 2015b).

Even so, the flourishing of Hinduism was due largely to educated Hindus (some of whom might have been *Brahmins* but that is difficult to verify for a number of reasons, including name-switching), who took on the role of priests and conducted *pujas*, *jhandis*, *hawans*, etc., and delivered enlightened discourses on philosophy and culture (my great Aja was one such person). Here was perhaps the only genuine effort to propagate Hinduism: “priests” were not interested in money, cows, young girls or women, but discoursed from their hearts on spirituality without desiring anything in return. Once the “synthesis” was over and sources of employment, mainly in agriculture, grew, men apparently succumbed to “religion-fatigue” or at least an outward transformation of their thinking and devoted most of their energies to material welfare. From somewhere around the 1930s or thereabout, as the sex ratio approached equilibrium level (marginally more women than men of child-bearing age), the importance of women in sustaining and propagating Indian culture strongly reasserted itself. Even in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, where I had the privilege of first-hand observation, females are the majority of temple attendees. This historical fact remains true today as it was centuries ago. One wonders if indeed the oft-repeated observation is true: women are the custodian of Hindu culture, if not Hinduism itself.

Plausibly, my “evolutionary and historical” explanation for poor *Mandir* attendance by males is incomplete and too general in nature to be of much practical use. A more informed position should be based on a survey of males to ascertain why they do not attend *Mandir* in relatively large numbers. Speaking for myself – a Hindu male – I do not attend *Mandir* because I do not want to sit for hours listening to an ignorant and boring *Pandit*. What is worst, the rambling discourses and messages of *Pandits* are aimed at ordinary Hindus and not themselves. The message does not apply to the messenger. Most *Pandits* have a poor command of the English language and their articulation leaves much to be desired. The silent and accepted rule is that a *Pandit* must not be questioned and disrespected in any way. Indeed, questioning a *Pandit* is viewed as disrespecting him, a position I do not share. The *Pandit* is the fountainhead of knowledge and the sole authority on Hinduism even though his knowledge of Vedānat is limited or even non-existent. Further, I have no interest in rituals performed to fulfill some desire – desire-motivated rituals – and poorly done at that. This is the nature of “*Mandir* discipline,” which does not appeal to me for I refuse to silent my God-given ability to think. I am because I think rather than merely think I am.

*Mandirs* must be used for much more than the usual Sunday *puja* service and the occasional cultural activities. They should revert to some of the things temples originally did. Here I am referring in particular to education, both secular and spiritual. These domains are not different compartments of knowledge but form an integral whole. That integral, holistic perspective has to be instilled in us from childhood. Both must be pursued and not one to the neglect of the other. That and nothing else is the education of the whole person, the brain as well as the heart with both working jointly instead of independently. Temples should be forums for discourse on Hindu culture and philosophy – the *katha* our fore-parents, including my great Aja, who used to hold discourses under “cork-tress,” bottom-houses and the roadside. Sunday ritual could be cut by about half an hour, which could be dedicated to the discussion of selected *shlokas* from *Bhagavadgītā* or the *Upaniṣhads*. These discourses will facilitate the acquisition of a more rigorous and scientific understanding of both the *Śruti* (timeless, eternal) and *Smṛtis* (traditions) aspects of Hindu culture and philosophy. Gradually, Hindus will come to understand that we have de-emphasized the *Śruti* and upgraded the *Smṛtis*: we have substituted traditions for eternal values. We prefer mere beliefs for direct experience of truths and have become confused Hindus. *Mandirs* must be places of light and not darkness (as Hindus understand those two words).

## Endnotes

This article is a revised version of one written in 2011 for the CaribbeanHindu Network (CHN). It attracted a good deal of discussion but, of course, nothing concrete came out of the article or the discussion. It is as the proverb says: Rome was not built in a day.

1. It is a difficult but not impossible exercise to estimate the Hindu population only, but time does not permit. Interested readers may wish to consult my forthcoming book.
2. The terms “mandir” and “temple” are used interchangeably in this paper. Interestingly, Hindus in Guyana, at least those on the Essequibo Coast, use the word “mandir” and “mathiya” while those in North America prefer the word “temple.”
3. Brahman is not the same as the God of Semitic religions, but we shall use the term God in this article with that understanding. More Guyanese Hindus are familiar with the term “God” than “Brahman,” which is an indication to the extent to which Christian ideas and terminology have invaded our religious space.
4. This issue is discussed in detail in my forthcoming book titled *Sanatana Dharma and Plantation Hinduism: Exploration and Reflections of a Guyanese Hindu*, which, barring unforeseen contingencies, will be published later this year.
5. *Phale sakto* – see Bhagavadgītā V.12

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# The East Indians And Their Plague

**Rakesh Rampertab<sup>1</sup>**

After 180 years in the New World, the most dangerous threat to East Indians in Guyana is the failure of their foremost political organization, the People's Progressive Party (PPP), to execute a policy to overcome criminal and political violence against the party's supporters.

No force has affected and shaped the consciousness of the East Indians over these past 40 years as that of criminal and political violence, and representational politics by the PPP has failed extraordinarily to safeguard the East Indians' right to be secured in their person and property. Instead, the party has practiced a willful policy of appeasement to the politics of violence encouraged by their archrivals, the PNC, black militants, and die-hard PNC supporters.

Crime has been a plague for the East Indians. Its effect has evolved significantly over time. Take for example, the East Indian at a poll station on elections day. During the era of Mr. Forbes Burnham, East Indians were sometimes denied access into poll stations under the false pretext of multiple voting. However, in 2015, East Indians (PPP representatives) *inside* poll stations fled in fear of mob violence, leaving the election process and their supporters' rights unprotected.

This shows, apart from party neglect, that the underlying psychology of East Indian lifestyle has become so thoroughly brutalized by decades of violence, that the mere idea of political assault, instead of actual physical assault, will suffice to make them abandon their post.

Like yesterday, today the East Indian is still the easiest citizen to kill in Guyana, because the political leadership celebrated in the PPP has no practical solution to the aforesaid decades of violence and crime. The party is content to use East Indians as collateral damage, if it means a return to office. Until this leadership changes, more East Indians will be untimely killed.

I say "killed" and not "murdered" because a death by murder occurs in violation of a criminal or penal code. Here, during the past 30-40 years, crime is less a matter of law and more a matter of normalized daily routine, during which an East Indian life is perceived as a thing to be freely taken. Some of the occurrences of this period, such as those stated hereafter, are quite elaborate as to how meaningless East Indian life has become.

Thousands of women have been raped or sexually assaulted, resulting in a host of medical, biological, personal, and familial problems—abortions, divorces, broken families, intra-familial violence, et cetera. Millions in currency have been spent to convert homes into prisons with grille-work to defend against intruders, and yet thousands of teens have had to patrol their streets at nights, instead of sleeping and preparing for school the following day.

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<sup>1</sup>*Rakesh Rampertab, Esq., is a practicing attorney in New York City. He was the editor for the Guyanaundersiege website between 2001-2006.*

Thousands of East Indians have died untimely deaths, some overseas and years after from injuries sustained from bandits; thousands of homes have been burglarized, some repeatedly, and from them hundreds of thousands of items of personal property have been carted off, amounting to billions of currencies stolen.

Indeed, this transfer of asset and currency have created an underground economy which existed since the latter days of Burnham, fueling a stranger form of black market whereby personal property removed from East Indian homes and persons without their consent, are bartered. In the eighties, we had what may be called “nighttime traffic,” or a description of criminals venturing into primarily sugarcane villages and carting off stolen items. The police inventory has failed to document this, as did leading economists such as Dr. Clive Thomas who refused to discuss this in his essays about an “underground economy” in Guyana.

Our history also shows a repeated culture of political thuggery at elections aimed at East Indians. Yet, the PPP has no corresponding tradition of prosecution of thugs or political agents. The dockets in court are empty. The result of this is that East Indians are not allowed to govern Guyana through elections and party representation.

For example, we have from 1997 to 2006, a concerted effort to prevent, reduce, or overthrow any form of East Indian presence in the Executive Office by way of criminal and political violence. The PPP through its policy of appeasement has played its part in support of this.

It is the PPP that agreed with the PNC leadership to reduce a 5-year PPP term in 1997 to one of 3 years. It is the leadership of these two parties that illegally set aside ballots legally cast by the electorate at the polls, because a judge ruled that there were some election irregularities. If this is the standard, why isn't the 2015 APNU-AFC term reduced to 3 years? Was not one region won by a mere single vote, without any automatic vote recount?

But this is the legacy of the politics of appeasement—it is how the PNC were helped to dilute the constitutional value of an East Indian's vote, and right to elect a government. It happened again in 2001 when, after winning the elections, the PPP regime under Mr. Bharrat Jagdeo, conceded at least 12 concessions to the losing party, PNC, after a “dialogue” that was premised on street violence against East Indian-owned properties and persons.

The then PNC leader, Mr. Desmond Hoyte, said he prevailed as he argued from a “position of strength,” a reference to the threat of anti-East Indian crime and violence. This is at the heart of the plague facing East Indian life in Guyana. With his statement, Mr. Hoyte surpassed even Mr. Burnham, in openly embracing street violence. When he was once asked during the sixties' disturbances to get his supporters off the streets to end the violence, Mr. Burnham reportedly noted that he who calls off the dogs, owns the dogs.

But the PPP appeasement policy backfired in 2002 when black militants, hardened criminals, elements within the PNC, and senior figures within the security forces began an insurgency to remove the 2001-2006 Jagdeo administration. A jailbreak was staged to harness the skills of hardened criminals; pamphlets were distributed amongst army ranks openly calling for East Indians to be attacked, and some militants claimed women and children were not to be spared.

Much more happened, of course. For example, a right to free movement ended. East Indians found themselves practically prohibited from the village of Buxton. Mr. Jagdeo stayed away. Buxton became a mini state within the state. Had it not been for the advent of private citizens to resist the insurgency, both on the ground and in the media, more villages would have been held sieged. In some villages, homeowners were being openly told to flee or be killed.

In short, the black militants and their supporters in high places invented a war to overthrow the PPP, and then lost their own war. They were beaten, even if for the first time. Black political leaders were scared to venture out in public and notable employed criminals were themselves killed. Inevitably, this kind of war will be re-invented again in the future. It is key, therefore, for East Indians to document and speak about what occurred. It is part of our history. Some want it to be silenced. Mr. David Granger attempted to reduce the significance of the defeat by referring to what transpired as merely the “Troubles.” But the FBI came to Guyana and identified it for what it was: an insurgency. Had the so-called “Buxton” gunmen won their war then East Indian life would have been strangled much more.

Gratitude should be offered to those persons—most notable amongst them is, of course, Mr. Shaheed “Roger” Khan, who resisted the black militants and rogue army and police officers and PNC elements, to prevent the overthrow of the PPP regime. Mr. Khan was a target of some within the leadership of the army for years. Ultimately, however, the refusal of Mr. Jagdeo to accept Mr. Khan back into Guyana when a request was made by Suriname, only created a loophole for the eventual removal of a regime elected by East Indians.

While Mr. Jagdeo returned to office in 2006, it was primarily due to East Indian support, and rightly so, for Roger Khan. Mr. Jagdeo had no formal answer for the insurgency. As the head of the army, he was ineffective and lacked the respect of inferior officers—which he attempted to cure by offering yearly but ineffective financial bonuses. Between 2002-2005, AK-47s, bullets, flak jackets, army kits et cetera were still moved (not “stolen” as reported by the press) knowingly from the army into the hands of political elements and criminals based in Buxton.

They formed a “parallel army” inside Buxton. When army officers working in tandem with elements within the PNC, and the militants, tried to make the public believe that Mr. Roger Khan “stole” AK-47s from the army, Mr. Jagdeo remained as quiet as a church mouse. This is despite being reliably informed that weapons bought with tax payers’ money were being strategically moved into Buxton to kill the very tax payers that paid for them. Mr. Jagdeo blindly accepted intelligence reports compiled by the very army officers who were involved in the insurgency to remove him from office. None of the warmongers was ever prosecuted. Indeed, some of these persons are now members of parliament or advisors to the current regime in Guyana. Mr. Jagdeo himself is now leader of the opposition.

We are back to square one. Almost. It needs to be said that too much power is concentrated in the PPP regarding East Indian welfare and reduced to a handful of persons operating with secrecy and suspicion that prohibit any effective approach to reduce the violence levelled against East Indians. It is time that the party adopt a policy to counter all this violence and facilitate reports of attacks to be filed by crime victims.

# Indians Attitude To Education During And Immediately After The Indentureship Period In British Guiana (Now Guyana)

Harry T. Hergash<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, the view has been perpetuated that the indentured Indians to British Guiana, now Guyana, were not keen on education for their children. Instead, they preferred to send their children to work as child labourers on the sugar plantations to earn wages to supplement the family earnings. While it is true that during and immediately after the period of indentureship, Indian parents indulged in this practice, the causative factors have often been misconstrued to fit the negative stereotype of the Indians as money grabbers. This article looks at this matter from the perspective of the Indians and their reality at the time.

The majority of the Indians worked as agricultural labourers on the sugar estates, working long hours, for little compensation, with no injury or sick benefits. In fact, most of the strikes on the sugar estates from the time of indentureship up to the Enmore martyrs' strike in 1948, which led to major political changes in the colony, involved complaints over poor wages. Out of necessity, many workers had to seek additional ways to boost their income. Often an indentured immigrant would be involved in kitchen gardening, cattle raising for milk, and rice cultivation for personal consumption while, at the same time, maintaining a regular job on the plantation that lasted from eight to ten or twelve hours per day. In such an environment, it was a matter of struggle for survival, and education for children was not a priority. Instead of attending school, children had to be engaged in tasks to help supplement the family's meagre income.

The immigrants' plight is reflected in the observations of Messrs. Pillai and Tiwary, who were members of a three-person Government of (British) India delegation to the colony in 1922. Their findings are recorded by Peter Ruhoman, *Centenary History of the East Indians in British Guiana 1838-1938* (Reprinted by The 150th Anniversary Committee of the Arrival of Indians in Guyana May 5, 1838). A few quotes, as reported by Ruhoman, are informative, page 83, "at the current rate of wages the debit side shows a considerable excess over the credit side and it is clear that the average earnings of a shovel-man must be raised by 80%, of a male weeder by 83% a week, before they can even make both ends meet... if the above increments were to be granted, even then the labourers could not be said to be earning a living wage, since after ten years continuous residence in the Colony they would return to their native land as paupers," and, page 85, "...in the case of the vast majority, it may be said that they are just above the poverty line, some below and others slightly above," and those among the lot who had succeeded in saving money had done so by "continuously stinting and starving themselves".

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<sup>1</sup> Harry T. Hergash was among the first batch of students of the University of Guyana in 1963 where he pursued a B.Sc. in Biology. Whilst a student at UG, he taught at the Annandale Government Secondary School. After graduating, he worked with Bookers Sugar Estates, now GUYSSUCO, then lectured at the University of Guyana. He has lived in Canada since 1974 where he studied Business Administration, and worked in the Ontario Public Service. He is a founding member of the University of Guyana Guild of Graduates, Ontario, Canada, and has been President since 1994. In this capacity he was involved in setting up several annual financial awards, based on academic performance, for students at the University. He was instrumental in the publication of the book "The University of Guyana - Perspectives on the Early History" that documents the history of the University from the perspective of Drs. Drayton, Earp and Irvine, the three critical players in the early years. He has published in newspapers, magazines, and peer-reviewed journals. Also, he is the author of "A Collection of Indian-Guyanese Words and Phrases and Their Meanings".

Present day psychologists will recognize that the behaviour of the immigrants at that time fitted neatly into Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist who developed his theory in the 1940s and published his book *Motivation and Personality* in 1954 in which he introduced the concept of Hierarchy of Needs. His original hierarchy identified five sets of human needs and these he arranged in a pyramid with the most important being at the bottom of the pyramid and those with decreasing importance forming successive layers above. In his scheme, food, clothing and shelter are included in the bottom layer, i.e., the most important. Based on the observations of Pillai and Tiwary in the preceding paragraph, it is clear that the earnings of children were critical for the basic needs to survive.

It is interesting to note that while the immigrants have been the object of derision for putting their children in the workforce to supplement family income, the behaviour of the poorer classes in England and the United States in similar circumstances was never called into question by local critics and historians. During and subsequent to the Industrial Revolution in England, it was commonplace for children under the age of ten, some around seven, to be found working in factories and coal mines for long hours under dreadful conditions. Peter Kirby, in a chapter titled "The Historic Visibility of Child Labour and the Mines Act of 1842" in the book, *A thing of the past*, edited by Michael Lavolette, notes that in some marginal coal districts "the threat of poverty resulting from the exclusion of children induced both miners and owners to turn a blind eye to violations of the Act" and "in some primitive coal districts, the harsh working conditions of which the Children's Employment Commission complained lingered into the twentieth century". As well, for the war years of 1914-1918, he quotes the report of the Chief Medical Officer, Board of Education, Sir George Newman, who stated that during these years boys and girls of eight and nine years worked in a variety of jobs for long hours with low wages under unfavourable conditions.

And in the United States, an Eastern Illinois University article captioned "[Childhood Lost: Child Labor During the Industrial Revolution](http://eiu.edu/eiutps/childhood.php)" (<http://eiu.edu/eiutps/childhood.php>) provides the following excerpts: "In the years that followed the Civil War, known as the "Rise of Industrial America, 1876 - 1900" on the American Memory Timeline of the Library of Congress Learning Page, the United States emerged as an industrial giant... This era of industrial growth transformed American society creating a new class of wealthy entrepreneurs and a comfortable middle class. The increase in industry resulted in a growth among the blue collar working class. This labor force was made up of millions of newly arrived immigrants and vast numbers of families migrating from rural areas to cities with the hope of job security and prosperity... With a dream of a better life, rural families relocated to the cities to find work. Sadly, most were disappointed when they arrived and discovered that the truth was not as "rosy" as they had been led to believe. The jobs available required long hours and offered little pay. In most situations, every able family member was needed to work to simply keep the family above the poverty level. Those working included children as young as three."

Another pertinent point relating to the apathy of the Indians over education in general is the fact that job openings were not available for educated children of most immigrants. Up to the mid 1950s, qualified children of Indian immigrants or their descendents had to convert to Christianity in order to become a teacher in the colony's school system. Likewise, children of the immigrants or their descendents had great difficulty gaining entry into the country's Civil Service although they were very well qualified. In fact, those who came from the countryside from parents who were agricultural labourers were almost totally excluded from entry, irrespective of qualification. Education was only beneficial to those extremely brilliant students who converted to Christianity and were able to gain scholarship for study in medicine or law.

Computations from data provided on page 214, Table 23 of Dwarka Nath's, *A History of Indians in British Guiana*, provide useful information. These show that in 1931 Indians made up 8.1 % (241 out of 2,982) of the Public Service and of these, nearly a half (118) were employed as "Messengers and similar grades". Among teachers, 7.1 % (100 out of 1397) were Indians. However, in the Medical Profession Indians accounted for 15.7 % (129 out of 820) of the total and in the Legal Profession, Indians were 15.7 % (14 out of 89) of the total. One cannot help but note that in both medicine and law, independent professions, the proportion of Indian representation was almost twice that of their representation in the Public Service or in Teaching.

The barriers to entry into Teaching and the Public Service likely caused Indians to focus on Medicine and Law and by 1935 (according to the earlier referenced work of Dwarka Nath, page 190, 52 % (85 out of 165) of the medical practitioners were Indians and 50 % (110 out of 220) barristers and solicitors were Indians. The experience of Dr. Cheddi Jagan, a dentist and former Premier and President of Guyana, is relevant and informative. In his book, *The West On Trial*, (Hansib Caribbean edition, page 43) he wrote: "As it turned out, going abroad to study dentistry was purely accidental. The fact was I could not find work. Armed with an Oxford and Cambridge School Certificate at the end of the school year 1935, I tried to get a job. But trying became hunting. My father and I knocked at many doors. The civil service was closed. A teaching job was proposed, but the salary offered was only \$20 a month. Besides, there were suggestions that if I wanted to become a teacher, I would have to become a Christian, and my parents would have none of this."

One final point worth considering is parents' fear of conversion of their children to Christianity in the school system. At that time, there was a concerted effort to Christianize Indians and because the schools were all operated by various Christian denominations, parents were suspicious of the school system. This would have simply fortified the immigrants' belief formed in their homeland. The majority came from the United Provinces and Bihar, areas that were the battle grounds of the 1857 Indian Mutiny, and the Mutiny, which had horrendous consequences to both the British and the Indians, was partly due to the belief that the British were surreptitiously trying to get Indians to break their Hindu and Muslim dietary codes in attempting to Christianize them. Consequently, the fear of conversion was a major, long standing concern which must be factored in any analysis.

Of all the Christian denominational schools in the colony, the most successful in attracting Indian students were those operated by the Canadian Mission, an arm of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. The Canadian Mission focused entirely on the Indians, taught the Hindi language in the schools and encouraged the Indians to retain aspects of their culture, instead of becoming Europeanized. Conversion was not a prerequisite for entry to these schools. However, education was intended to aid conversion of the Indians and, not surprising, in the standard text (*Hindi Ki Pahili Pustak - Hindi First Book*) used to teach the Hindi language, one detects evidence of Christian proselytizing – The Ten Commandments in Hindi, and morning and evening prayers to "Masih", the Hindi word for Christ. Thus, even in these schools, parents had to be on guard.

It is apparent that a number of factors were responsible for the absence of keenness for education by Indians during and immediately after the indentureship period. Money was a critical factor for a family's survival and the Indians, like the British and the American people in similar circumstances, took a practical approach to child labour. In addition, fear of conversion of their children to the Christian religion, based on reasonable grounds, was a compelling factor also. However, within a relatively short period of time after the ending of Indentureship, Indians were able to overcome

these disadvantages and make rapid progress in all spheres of life in the country.

By 1945, many Indians had established themselves financially through ownership of small businesses and development of the rice and cattle industries. Many moved up the social ladder into the middle-class and, through agitation under the leadership of the British Guiana East Indian Association, education of Indian children became a priority. Historian Dwarka Nath, reports that by 1950, Indian children accounted for over 50% of

the total number of children in primary schools although Indians were less than 50% of the country's population. Progress continued with the People's Progressive Party in government during the period 1957-63 when barriers to entry into the civil service and especially the teaching profession were removed, and government secondary schools were built throughout the country, making secondary education more accessible to Indians who are more heavily concentrated in rural areas. It is noteworthy that when the University of Guyana held its first convocation in 1967, 18 (67%) of the 27 graduates were Indian-Guyanese.

The descendants of the indentured Indians have come a long way since the end of indentureship. They have held the highest political office in the land; they have a major presence in commerce and industry; and they are well represented in the independent professions. Their numbers are on the increase in the civil service and teaching profession but still very low in the security forces. Overall, as a result of historical and cultural factors, they have dominance (in terms of net worth and corporate control) in the private sector where risks and rewards go hand-in-hand, but are under-represented in the public service where job security is more valued.



Executives of the British Guiana East Indian Association 1925. Standing L-R: James Insai, M. Panday, M. Akbar, Gharbaran Dobay, HB Gajraj, Dr. JB Singh, S. Rohoman, WD Dinally, Ayube Edun, G. Jillani (Vice President); Sitting: L-R: AK Amin (Vice President), Dr. WH Wharton (Hon. President), KM Singh (Indian Commissioner), Mungal Singh (President).

# Status of Indian Guyanese After 180 Years: What Shall We Celebrate?

Rishidew Pooran<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

While economics is not the only measure of how Indians are doing after 180 years since the start of indentureship, it is an important metric and one of the few that is based on hard data. It is also the most widely used gauge of well-being across nations. Economic performance varies across individuals, nations, time and place. Here, I take an extremely cursory view of the Indian Guyanese situation. For this purpose, I divide the population into two categories: those Indian-Guyanese who migrated and those still living in Guyana. In addition, migrated Guyanese may be divided into two subgroups: those migrated before 2001 and those after. This division is rather arbitrary but is sufficient for the current purpose since it serves to establish a cut-off point of the hurdles confronting this immigrant community in the United States (US). It was easier to come to the US pre-2001 and easier to make a good living.

## Guyana

Indians make up approximately 40% (295,000) of the population in Guyana, a small South American country, one of the poorest within the CARICOM countries. According to the World Bank, Guyana's per capita GDP was US\$4,529 in 2016, which places it above that of Haiti and a few other countries in the Americas. In terms of health and nutrition, Guyana is way down on the list. Life expectancy at birth in Guyana was 66.7 years in 2016, which is just above that of Haiti (63.3 years) but far lower than that of other countries in the region. Life expectancy at birth in 2016 was 71.4 years in Suriname, 70.7 years in Trinidad and 74.5 years in Venezuela.

The statistics are quite revealing and frightening at the national level, but are Indians any better or worse than the national figures? Traditionally, Indians have been doing better primarily because of they are not dependent upon the public sector and thus the government for employment and livelihood. Indians dominate the back-breaking work of the rice and sugar industries, construction, manufacturing, finance and medicine. Two of the main industries for Indian employment (sugar and rice) have almost collapsed mainly because of poor government policies, poor planning and poor marketing strategy. The closing of the sugar estates will eliminate employment for approximately 7,000 Indian workers. The severe reduction in rice price is having an even bigger impact to the Indian community with over 12,000 individual families being affected. The 19,000 families affected by problems in these two industries equates to approximately 76,000 individuals directly impacted. The ripple or multiplier effects must also be considered, which are significantly higher than the first-round effects. By the time it is all said and done, all Indians in Guyana will feel the squeeze emanating from these two industries. Considering the substantial adverse economic impact on Indians in Guyana, especially in rural communities, as a group, Indians are probably doing worse than the other races in Guyana, but for sure they are doing poorly when compared to other CARICOM countries. This is despite having an Indian based government in power for 23 years, from 1992 to 2015. Although the PPP inherited the country with mammoth debts and numerous other issues, they did little to improve living and working conditions for Indians while in power. It must be noted that the current government can only minimally be blamed for this state of affair, as

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<sup>1</sup> Rishidew Pooran was born in Berbice. He attended Tagore Memorial Secondary School. He received his BE (Engineering) from Pratt Institute, MS (Software Engineering) from Stevens Institute of Technologies, and MBA from Florida Institute of Technologies. He works as an Engineer for a large organization.

poor living and working conditions have been inherited from the PPP government. The decline of rice and sugar started under the PPP. The country was already one of the poorest in the CARICOM and the GDP was tremendously low. The PPP must be held accountable for the sad situation of Indians across Guyana.

Employment and power correlate to economic wellbeing. The police force is predominantly Black (under 20% Indians in the police force) and the army is almost exclusively Blacks. No government data is publicly available on the ethnic distribution of the military forces in Guyana. Once again, the PPP for the years it was in office did nothing to balance the forces – a great disservice to the Indian community and all under-represented ethnicities, and the country. Guyana remains one of the only multi-ethnic country with an ethnic (Black) dominated army and police.

Good paying jobs directly translate to economics. In Guyana, Indians are grossly marginalized by the present administration. Government Agencies and State Boards are overwhelmingly led by Blacks despite education, knowledge, skills and experience of members of other ethnic groups. From observations of newspaper reports, less than 20% of all leadership positions are filled by Indians. Since Government jobs, especially the good ones are going to non-Indians, then the Indians are further pushed into lower economic statuses. Across the board, Governments jobs are almost exclusively in the hands of Blacks. Historically, Indians worked in the private sector, often self-employment in the mud-fields, rather than the public sector with added benefits. Indians dominate the private sector, an unappreciated sector built largely by the genius of Indian businessmen, many of whom originate from the rural countryside.

There is no denial that Guyana has wealthy Indians who defy the national statistics, but these wealthy persons still have to live in a country with numerous social ills like high crime rate, rampant pollution, intolerable suicide rate, deplorable medical care, racial discrimination, flooding, blackouts, etc. So, they too are enduring a poor quality of life.

### **North America: Migrated before 2001**

Guyanese Indians migrated to North America before 2001 are economic powerhouses with a fair proportion of the family in the millionaire (US\$) category. The community progressed well and are on firm economic footing. Many are college educated with good paying jobs. For the most part, they own homes, accumulated various assets, made profitable investments, and have strong retirement portfolios. Bollywood style weddings and Hollywood style parties are common place in the community. Theme and destination weddings are becoming the standard. Multiple family vacations per year to exotic places are not unusual. Making expensive purchases is not an issue. One cannot avoid observing the expensive cars being driven, and the custom-tailored clothes being worn. The community as a whole is very charitable and generous. Many in the community send their children to name brand colleges and universities, and the children themselves are making tremendous economic gains with respectable professions. Both the parents and the children are living lavishly. Overall, this particular group bodes well economically, and the future should only get better.

### **North America: Migrated after 2001**

In North America, house prices were extremely high, jobs were scarce and starting salaries were low. Combining these factors, new Guyanese Indian immigrants could not experience the same level of economic growth as their brothers and sisters who arrived decades before them. Before 2001, a family was able to earn enough to cover all expenses and still accumulated a saving. They bought houses which quickly appreciated in value. Then in 2001, 9-11 happened, which was also a

game changer. New immigrant families were faced with many financial and other challenges; the biggest one being unaffordable rent for living quarters. The wages earned, were not sufficient to cover just the rent, much less all other expenses. As such, savings were not there for down payments on homes or to do any investments. Many ended up living in illegal attics and basements. Some eventually managed to purchase homes but still having large mortgages and considerable credit card debts. Many still live from pay check to pay check.

## Conclusion

The fact that Guyanese Indians who migrated to North America are doing significantly better than those at home clearly demonstrate that if the Indians in Guyana are given the opportunity, freedom and security they would also be do better. And by their efforts the country as a whole will be better off. It is not the people who are at fault; the fault lies squarely with government. All post-Independence governments, Indian and African, are arrogant, uncaring, corrupt, interested in their own pockets and lack the ability to govern well. After 180 years of Indians in Guyana, there has been substantial progress due to the will and determination of the Indians. However, the Indian community in Guyana faces serious problems that must be tackled with urgency if they are going to survive as a distinct group. Articles in the current publication to commemorate the 180 Anniversary of Indians in Guyana point to the many problems, including population declines, and erosion of Indian culture. At this point in our history, it is apt to take stock of where we are, who we are and chart a course for the next 180 years.



*The Manager's House.* Source: Jenkins 2010[1871].

# Fall of Sanatana Dharma, Rise of Plantation Hinduism

Ramesh Gampat <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This paper argues that the beliefs and practices of Guyanese Hindus today bear little resemblance to Sanatana Dharma (Vedānta), which we now call Hinduism. Our knowledge of Hinduism pales in comparison to that of our ancestors and we have certainly lost the “argumentative tradition” (Sen 2005). Instead of curiosity, inquiry, self-learning and experiment to verify “religious truths,” our minds have become closed and we accept as gospel whatever the *Purohita – Pandit* – says. But be not deceived: Hinduism is not on the decline. Neither has it become degraded and corrupt nor will it disappear sometime into the future (Endnote 1).

Early Christian Missionaries thought Indian immigrants did not bring Hinduism with them, that it did not survive the crossing of the *Kala Pani*. Once this grossly mistaken position was abandoned some decades later, missionaries began to see and speak of a revival, re-emergence, re-awakening or refurbishing of Hinduism in Guyana (Endnote 2). These terms suggest a rebirth of Hinduism, which *ipso facto*, must have retreated into oblivion and perhaps dead. This is both illogical and nonsensical. Hinduism is eternal; it has no beginning or ending, and is beyond time, place and causation. “Eternal” – that is what the word “Sanatana” means. Hinduism is Truth that can be experienced here and now by one and all; you do not have to wait for a far-away, somewhere-in-the-sky, heaven. Truth cannot be slayed even though it could be pushed under the rug, distorted and maligned but temporarily only.

## Rumors of the Death of Hinduism

Indians landed in Guyana one hundred and eighty years ago, bound for the sugar plantations. That was also when Hinduism was introduced to the land and in the Americas as a whole. The first time the American public formally learned about Hinduism was through the World’s Parliament of Religions, a gathering of practitioners of different faiths, which took place in Chicago in 1893. At that unique event, Swami Vivekananda, a young monk representing Hinduism, famously began his speech hailing his hosts as “sisters and brothers of America.” It was most unusual for an Indian monk to embrace the audience as a single family, at a time when societies were segregated and racial superiority was an accepted part of life. Vivekananda received a standing ovation.

On the other hand, Hinduism in Guyana had a most humble beginning on the sugar plantations. There were no conferences, parliament of religions or discussion groups. The environment was hostile to both the mind and body and Christian Missionaries lambasted Hinduism as evil incarnate even though they believed immigrants left their religions back in India. They thought Hinduism did not survive the crossing of the *Kala Pani*. The idea of a premature death of Hinduism in British Guiana is based on the almost total absence of external evidence of its presence during the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ramesh Gampat was born in Essequibo. He is an Economist, who has worked for almost three decades with the United Nations Development Programme. While stationed in Asia, he was a member of the team that prepared four Asia-Pacific Human Development Reports and is the co-editor (with Anuradha Kati Rajivan) of a two-volume book titled *Perspectives on Corruption and Human Development*, which was published by Macmillan (Delhi) in 2009. He is the author of *Guyana: From Slavery to the Present. Volume 1. Health System and Guyana: From Slavery to the Present. Volume 2. Major Diseases*, both of which were published by Xlibris (2015). Dr. Gampat has also published academic papers on inflation, poverty, international trade, human development, gender and corruption. He was a tutor in Economics at the University of Guyana (1981-1983) and an academic faculty member (2005-2006) of the United Nations Development Programme’s Virtual development Academy, hosted by Jones International University.

first few decades of immigration and prior to the evolution of a common set of beliefs and practices. Gazing at Hinduism in British Guiana, the learned and indefatigable Reverend H. V. P. Bronkhurst could not help but notice the absence of the external trappings:

Hinduism in the Colony is very different from the system contained in the Vedas: for its professors are not allowed to do the things to which they are most inclined. In this country we do not see the streets and estates crowded with temples of all descriptions; we do not see parties of Brahmans and others in procession, with drums and music celebrating some particular holiday; we do not meet with troops of Yogees, or penitents, and religious mendicants on the roads journeying to some sacred river to wash away their sins by bathing in it. We do not see in this Colony the Hindus going to Gaya to perform the obsequies of their ancestors; to Jaganath, to prove his faith by self-immolation; to Cassi [Kashi] or Banaras, to wait patiently on the sacred ground, between the Varuna and the Asi, the stroke of death: nor the Hindu females marching to Tiruputti, the abode of the husband of the Goddess of Prosperity, also called Vengaden – the remover of defects – to wipe away the reproach of barrenness (Bronkhurst 1883:459).

The first line of this passage is perhaps one of the few instances where a colonial writer admits, and states explicitly, that the religious freedom of immigrants was restricted: “its professors are not allowed to do the things to which they are most inclined.” Why? That question Bronkhurst did not pose and therefore could not answer. Perhaps because he wants to equate Hinduism with its external trappings, which, he says, are the “system contained in the Vedas.” The Vedas contain so such things as described in this passage. He misunderstands, for example, the underlying idea behind what he calls “religious mendicants.” The Hindu idea is that of *sannyāsa* and not “religious mendicants.” *Sannyāsa* is the last of the four stages (Endnote 3) of human life and the *sannyāsin* renounces all worldly possessions and ties. Completely detached from the world and the things in it, the *sannyāsin* has no home, no possession, no family, no connection. S/he is a wandering monk, performing selfless services to the community, sleeping anywhere and eating whatever is given him. For Hindus, it is an obligation to be generous to a *sannyāsin* and not to turn him away from your door empty handed. It is to such highly spiritual persons that Bronkhurst applies the term “religious mendicants.” A clarification is in order: “completely detached” does not mean that the *sannyāsin* is devoid of care or feelings and live in the world completely driven by instincts. Instead, the phrase simply means that the *sannyāsin* is not attached to the things of the world even if he owns some of the things you and I own. He remains unfazed if he loses his cell phone or does not lose it, if he gets to eat or does not eat, for example. His mind remains undisturbed. He is even-minded and dualities - good and bad, happiness and misery, called *dvandvas* (Bhagavadgītā IV.22) do not disturb his composure. The word “*sannyasa*” comes from *sam* = complete + *ni* = down + *ās* = to throw; hence “to throw down completely.” For Hindus, it is an obligation to be generous to a *sannyāsin* and not to turn him away from your door empty handed. It is to such highly spiritual persons that Bronkhurst applies the term “religious mendicants.”

Unlike Hindus in India, those in British Guyana could not have trekked to sacred places and rivers, even if they wanted to or even if such places existed in the Colony. The lack of the physical expression of their religiosity was not because immigrants suddenly became irreligious. On the contrary, the absence of such “shows” was directly related to the topography of Guyana, the relatively small Indian population who were in the Colony for only about half a century and therefore had neither the time nor freedom to “Hinduize” the landscape, lack of the requisite infrastructure, and the very nefarious system of indenture, which, among other things, required a six-day working week and imposed draconian restrictions on movement outside of the plantations. “The law puts two weapons into the hand of the employer wherewith to enforce his rights. These are the Labour Law proper, and the Vagrancy Law, or Laws enforcing ascription to the soil,” according to the 1870 Commission of Inquiry Into the Treatment of Immigrants (British Parliamentary Papers 1871: Volume IV: para 404, p. 186). Planters did not import Indians out of benevolence, but rather to serve

their own self-interest, and employed various means to accomplish that end. In other words, the new and unfamiliar location and the legal contract into which illiterate immigrants inextricably bounded themselves – a legal fence -, perhaps unwittingly, were not conducive of any outward expression of Hinduism (or Islam). Bronkhurst fails to understand that the external trappings of Hinduism, whether in India or elsewhere, are not a prerequisite for the survival of Hinduism. The absence of “externals” were not evidence that immigrants did not bring their religion with them. If Hinduism did not survive the Kala Pani, how does one explain the paltry success of proselytization?

Bronkhurst went one step further to deprecate Hinduism in British Guiana. Even if there was a lack of adequate physical expression of Hinduism, the man declared that Hindus adhered blindly to a “cursed system” of beliefs:

Although we do not witness these things [external trappings described in the previous quoted passage], yet their religion exercises a prodigious influence over the people. Blind adherence is paid to this cursed system. The Coolies deem it as perilous to forsake their religion as for a locomotive to quit the line. Whatever may be thought by others of the absurdity of the thing, they nevertheless sincerely believe in the divinity of a dumb idol. The evidence of their senses goes for nothing in the face of time-honored and hoary tradition. ‘How came it spring out of the ground if it were not God? Would their forefathers have worshipped it if it were a mere stone? A mere picture? Does it not avert danger, succor in trouble, remove diseases, send rain and fruitful seasons? And how could it do these things if it were not God? It appears like any other stone or *patthar*, any other picture – *padan*. But it is only in appearance; it is truly God’ (Bronkhurst 1883: 459-60).

His utter contempt for Hinduism aside, Bronkhurst fails to understand that Hindus do not incline to pantheism, which asserts that everything is God; that is only part of the story. This was a particularly happy and popular refrain among missionaries. If Bronkhurst was scornful of the “time-honored and hoary tradition,” – and Josa says the same thing in almost the same words: “hoary religious legends and customs” (Josa 1912: 305) - he mocked questions immigrants raised about Christianity instead of providing answers. His refusal derives from the presumption that Hinduism was paganism and that Christianity was the only true religion, and hence the only true civilizing tool. Therefore, a response to immigrants’ irritating questions was unnecessary.

### **Slow Rise of Mandirs**

Even thirty-five years after indenture began, the 1870 Commission of Inquiry found only two Hindu temples in British Guiana.

Except in the most remote parts of the Colony, both Coolies and Chinese appear to have abandoned all outward observance of their religion. We noticed but one Hindoo temple, in the Island of Wake-naam, and one high up the Berbice River. Brahmins are not plentiful among them, and, technically, by crossing the sea, caste is lost by all those who have any caste to loose. This loss, however, can be easily repaired on returning to India by performing the prescribed rituals. And, in the meanwhile, the Coolie immigrant keeps up the tradition of his religion by an occasional gratuity to some wandering reader of Books.

It is probable that so long as the intention to return is nominally entertained by all, and really by the majority, the change of religion in any individual of their number will be looked upon as even more unnatural and odious than with cases in India (British Parliamentary Papers 1871: Vol. IV: paras. 904-904, pg. 360-61).

The 1870 Commission seems to suggest that immigrants did not start to establish settled social and religious rituals in public spaces until the 1860s and 1870s. The sighting of only two temples does necessarily mean that temples and mosques (Endnote 4), however crude, did not exist in remote areas where immigrants were present in relatively large numbers. A more likely

explanation for the absence of temples, proposed by Jayawardena, was that the numerous cults and sects were too small and scattered and restricted in movement outside of the plantations to make temple-building, which is a collective effort, a feasible task (Jayawardena 1966: 227). "The relative absence of temples in the 1860's gave the clergy the mistaken impression that the Indians were careless about their religion .... The absence of temples was of course no indication of an absence of religious rites since the greater part of Hindu worship can be and still is in Guyana performed not in a temple but in the home" (Moore 1970: 354). Unknowing to naïve missionaries and other observers of immigrants, Hinduism was alive on the plantations and villages of British Guiana. Truth cannot be slayed even if it can be maligned.

Hinduism was barely visible for environmental and legal reasons, but it was practiced quietly within the confines of the *logies* – squalid, fetid and wattled mud-houses – in which immigrants lived and in their mind throughout the day on the plantations. Hindus did not to abandon their religion. Once again, the relative paucity of external manifestation was but a reflection of the environment, the different geography, in which immigrants found themselves, the legal fence built by planters to restrict movement and the need for a period of acclimatization. According to Karna Bahadur Singh, "disruptions and dislocations must have been the dominant features among immigrants" for a considerable time after the commencement of immigration. The disruptions of their traditional patterns of life that began in India itself – herding immigrants into depots –, continued during the sea voyage and on the plantations. For example, immigrants, regardless of caste, religious or regional difference were placed together on the immigration vessels. Once in British Guiana, differences, including social, cultural or religious, were not recognized when immigrants were distributed to the plantations. Understandably, "no firm organization of social relations and cultural patterns" existed among immigrants prior to the 1880s (Singh 1980: 16).

Immigrants' scrupulous adherence to their religion, rituals and festivals, individually and collectively, in private and increasingly in public spaces, is attested to by Christian Missionaries, including Bronkhurst. Missionaries could not understand – perhaps did not want to understand - that Hinduism is a way of life, which implies that the immigrants' inner, spiritual orientation (*bhav* or attitude, devotion, the attitude of immersing oneself in the thought of God) cannot be purged easily for it requires the negation of all that they stood for. At least in this instance, Bronkhurst (1883: 459-60) has it right: "*The Coolies deem it as perilous to forsake their religion as for a locomotive to quit the line .... The evidence of their senses goes for nothing in the face of time-honored and hoary tradition*" (italics supplied). Little did he know that, according to Sanatana Dharma, one must go beyond the senses to realize Brahman; the senses are useful but not sufficient for this purpose. It seems clear, then, that by the 1880s Hinduism had taken deep roots in British Guiana and that as "the emphasis on the incarnation of Vishnu suggests, the Brahminical version was the dominant form" (Moore 1970:357). Missionaries had to change their belief about the death of Hinduism in less than two decades after their proselytization to immigrants began. They could no longer maintain the ridiculous claim that the absence of external evidence of Hinduism was an indication that Hinduism in British Guiana was dead. According to K. B. Singh:

We may imagine that for some time there was considerable adjustment taking place in this socio-cultural context, but by the 1880's crystallization and concretization of social patterns and ritual structures had become well-marked, as may be deduced from the commentaries of Bronkhurst in his publications of 1883 and 1888. During this period of development, from a little before 1870 to a little after 1880, Hindus may still have used temporary tents made of bamboo poles and coconut branches for religious ceremonies and festivals, and to house their idols, as they do even today where there are no temples, or where the existing ones are too small for attending devotees (Singh 1980: 14).

A decade before Singh wrote, R. J. Moore pointed out that the comparative absence of temples noted by the 1870 Commission “had been rectified” by the 1880s. His conclusion is based on the 1880 observations of an “Anglican missionary who was a keen and perceptive observer of East Indians, as well as a skillful linguist.” This missionary (P.F.L. Josa) observed:

that although these people have lost their caste, we must not for a moment suppose that they do not have their religion with them. The East Indian is naturally religious. The Hindoos have their little temples all over the country. There are many Brahmin priests - they have their prayers, why this (sic) to keep them in remembrance of their duties. They still long for the time to come when the great Aratava or the last incarnation of Vishnu or their millennium will take place - they long for the time when their souls being purified through transmigration they may become part and parcel of God himself from whom they sprang (quoted in Moore 1970: 357).

In addition to tents and small open structures, Hindus built “hut-temples,” according to Bronkhurst. His observation on this issue is important enough to justify a lengthy quote:

A Hindu temple is not constructed like a Christian sanctuary, with necessary accommodation for worshippers who meet regularly to celebrate the praises of the Deity in the strains of sacred poetry, and to make the voice of prayer and confession heard within its hallowed walls. It is not intended to accommodate a crowd of worshippers within its walls. Its worshippers stand outside in an area opposite the door, which is the only entrance belonging to the building. The priest, the representative of the people, is the only person who enters the temple through that door in order to perform the duties of his office in the presence of the idol, which stands at the lower end of the door, and so placed that the worshippers from outside might have a full view of, and fall down before, it. There is no window to a Hindu temple to let in light or admit air. The room, including the small space which is called the residence of the idol (*Swami Stalam*), before which burns a small oil lamp, and the space sufficiently spacious for the temple utensils, the offerings, and the officiating priest to stir or move about, is always dark and awe-inspiring. I have visited a few of these huts or places of worship called temples, built in primitive style by the coolies on some of the estates, and found them dismal enough, though the floors were pretty clean. These hut-temples are considered so sacred by the coolies, on account of the visible presence of the deity – the idol – they worship, that no unclean person can enter any of them without the preparatory ablutions being performed: no sandals or boots are allowed to be worn by the officiating priest or visitor whilst in the presence of the deity within the temple ... Whatever impurity or uncleanness may be found inside or outside the temple is quickly removed by besmearing the floor with a solution of cow-dung; and indeed no Hindu would go out of his house in a morning till the doorway has been rubbed with cow-dung (Bronkhurst 1888:79).

There is much evidence that Indian immigrants “had a strong impulse to construct more permanent religious structure during this period” (Singh 1980: 14). As the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, “hut temples” were gradually replaced by larger and better designed ones. The construction of temples required significant communal religious cohesiveness, a common purpose and communal effort, and therefore had to await the development of a critical mass of immigrants. There is another important reason, hinted at earlier, according to Jayawardena (1966:227): *“The organization required to build and maintain temples presupposes the cooperation of a group that cuts across sects, cult and caste differences. This cooperation could only have been achieved through a broader and more universalistic definition of Hinduism that effectively united all Hindus. The widespread support of the Brahmins, which hampered the missionaries, was an expression of the propagation of such a religion”* (italics supplied).

Singh finds that more durable religious structures began to dot and grace the landscape towards the end of the 19th century. “The survival of temples from this period [last quarter of the 19th century] on the one hand, and the apparent non-existence of any earlier structures on the other, supports the view that the last decade of the last century [19th] were the years when Hindu and Muslims began systematically building permanent religious centres.” This was a period when the

“desire to have temples [and mosques] of their own,” was accelerated. “Such activity,” he continues, “fits with the picture obtained on the stage of the evolution of Hinduism and Islam in Guyana during this period” (Singh 1980: 21). During these twenty-five years or so, immigrants endeavored to establish “the patterns of ancestral India. In the sphere of religion, the perceptual and conceptual universe of the ancestral land was concretized with the greatest authenticity and completeness” (Singh 1980: 17). For example, the annual round of festivals, ceremonies, fasts and rituals were preserved and adhered to most scrupulously. Temples – and mosques – built during this period closely followed the traditional architectural forms of those in India, if only on a considerably smaller and less sophisticated scale. Four temples built during this period, Karna Bahadur Singh writes in 1980 book, survived (at the time he wrote), and they share

a remarkable similarity in functional and architectural terms. They are all **Shivalas** or **Shiv Mandirs**: that is, those Hindus structures or temples dedicated to the Hindu god, **Shiva**. His iconographic representation by an oval, black stone, in the shape of a phallic symbol, is found enshrined in all these **Shivalas**. Near this stone is the image of the sacred bull, **Nandi**, associated with the god, **Shiva**. They also consist of only a single chamber or **cella** which contains the object of reverence, and this chamber, in three of these **Shivalas**, is roofed with a pyramidal or tapering spire (boldface in original; Singh 1980: 21).

Jayawardena (2004[1963]: 22) remarks that it was the emerging organization of traditional religions that appeared to Comins to be a “religious revival. This was marked by the building of Hindu temples and mosques, which presumes some degree of organization.” In one way or another, the “revival,” and thus the flourishing of Hinduism, was influenced by resistance to proselytization. As early as the 1860s, both Reverends Bronkhurst and Bhose complained that “coolie parsons” and other educated immigrants were frustrating their efforts to convert immigrants to Christianity. Collective resistance, led by educated Hindus, sowed the seeds of solidarity, which began to bloom from around the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Whether Comins’ phrase “religious revival” meant arising from nothing or building upon what was there already, no one knows for sure. From my standpoint, the phrase is both misleading and unfortunate. The elastic phrase is unfortunate because it lends itself to ambiguity and conveys the impression that Hinduism was something dispensable, which sets Hinduism on par with “minor religions.” It is misleading because rumors of the death of Hinduism in British Guiana were exaggerated; indeed, not warranted. Hinduism did not die or slumbered off into dormancy or declined and then, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, revived. Hinduism was always there even if the external symbols were deficient or inadequate. Hinduism was wired into the psyche of immigrants and one may even pronounce it an innate feature of Hindus. Even missionaries admitted the resilience of Hinduism, as Reverend V. Kidd observed: “A wonderful heritage of the Indian people is the religious instinct. Religion in India cannot be divorced from the life of the people. It comes into everything, enters into all their relationships and influences all their customs” (quoted in Ruhomon1988[1947]:258). This powerful insight was absent during the early days of proselytization but the seed of Hinduism – and Islam - was there; only conditions in British Guiana for its germination and flourishing were absent until about the last three decades or so of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From its humble and almost invisible beginning, Hinduism began to flourish in Guyana after the completion of the informal and ad hoc “synthesis” that lasted from the 1870s to around the 1930s or so. Arguably, the golden period of Santana Dharma in Guyana lasted from around the end of Indenture to about the 1950s or so. From there on, our idea of the Eternal Dharma gradually became corrupted.

## Plantation Hinduism: Meaning of the Term

The available evidence is thin, but it appears that from around the 1870s or so there was some effort, albeit neither organized nor systematic, to sift and fuse the many strands of beliefs and forms of worship among Hindus into a coherent body of knowledge. What emerged in British Guiana is a “single Hinduism,” the result of melding and harmonizing, if haphazardly and unintentionally, an array of different traditions, customs, and caste beliefs and practices into a central corpus we call “Sanatana Dharma.” Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec (1991:156) call it the “Great Tradition” and I call it “Plantation Hinduism.” The transformation of a diverse gamut of beliefs, practices and values was a daunting and long-drawn-out task, particularly because it was not a planned and meticulously executed undertaking. This explains why the word “synthesis” is a poor characterization of the process that led to the “Great Tradition.” It also explains why I enclose the word in quotation marks wherever the it appears in this paper. Much of what existed prior to the transformation was discarded and replaced with Purāṇaic ideas and semblances of Vedantic philosophies. Yet habits of mind are not easily surrendered, and many dogmas and superstitions and nuances survive the “synthesis.” The happy medley was perhaps a compromise, a concession, to accommodate the diversity that characterized immigrants. We shall never know.

Some readers will probably find the moniker “Plantation Hinduism” objectionable or even pejorative. That is definitely not my intention, but an unintended consequence for want of a better term that resonates equally well. There are two reasons for employing this phrase: legacy and analytic, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Plantation Hinduism ties us to some beliefs and practices present during Indian indenture. It therefore reminds, or ought to remind, of the long and bitter struggle of immigrants to preserve their religion, which we have inherited even if we color the inheritance through ignorance and vested interest. Some plantation superstitions (part of the legacy) have fallen by the way side and are no more. For example, according to Bronkhurst (1983: 123), East Indian shopkeepers and hucksters in the Colony would not accept credit for the first transaction of the new day. They believed that the “first money for the day” must come from a cash transaction, called “*bohni*,” which would bring good luck. Others are still with us, including the ridiculous belief that the departed soul needs certain accoutrements of the living, such as a cutlass, an umbrella, *chadar* and water, for the journey to Yamaraj. The deep, psychological hunger of immigrants for their religion on the plantation has not diminished today. That hunger is still with us and is a worthy legacy bequeathed by our ancestors upon their progeny. Then and now, we are an intensely religious people; only that religion is equated with mere belief now than then. Beyond that, there is the enduring and stultifying aspect of legacy of the “synthesis:” heavy dependence upon pandits and loss of the ability to think for ourselves when it comes to our Dharma.

From the methodological standpoint, the term Plantation Hinduism is not a descriptive or prescriptive category. It is an analytical construct that allows me to zero in on the major features, structural and substantive, of the Hinduism we practice. Structural features are those parameters or conditions that heavily influence the shape of the substantive factors. To employ an analogy, structural features are the “container” within which the substantive features, our beliefs and practices, are enclosed, held or contained. Structural features are the contours that encircle and define the conceptual and practical space of Plantation Hinduism. It is difficult to change the substance of Plantation Hinduism without changing its structure. The most important structural feature of Plantation Hinduism is the heavy dependence upon purohitas, who we call pandits, which is why “Nanny Hinduism” is an alternative terminology. Like little children, we depend upon purohitas to attend to all our religious needs and we meekly acquiesce to their dictates. Most Guyanese Hindus see pandits as the authority on Hinduism. Purohitas are not to be questioned, disrespected or embarrassed.

The price of vesting unquestionable authority in people who are largely illiterate, greedy, unethical and selfish is the dumbing or closing of the Hindu mind. In an important sense, Plantation Hinduism operates like a college classroom, where lectures are delivered by conceited, egoistic, self-centered professors (pandits) to an ignorant body of students who has given up the ability to think and reason. What are the lectures about? Crammed mantras, poor delivery, and incoherent, distorted, almost nonsensical discourse on the Śāstras – “nancy stories” or “duck stories,” as my father and his smallest cha-cha, respectively, used to call it. There is no take-away message to guide the sādḥaka, spiritual aspirant, whose problem is compounded by intellectual laziness.

### Plantation Hinduism: Structural Features

During the “synthesis,” Brahmin purohitas, who were among the chief architects of the “redefinition” of Hinduism, began to behave like Christian priests (Endnote 5). They treated the local Hindu community as a parish, visiting homes and the sick, doling out spiritual advice, helping to arrange marriages, preached and held services on Sundays, organized Sunday schools for children, and married and buried “parishioners.” Noticing this emerging trend, Jayawardena suggests that yajñās were akin to Christian mass meetings (of course, this is a misuse of the word). The “refurbished” Hinduism created a frightful dependence of ordinary Hindus upon purohitas. The very fact that the “synthesis” democratized Hinduism means that Hindu immigrants and their descendants needed the services of priests. The demand was great because a large portion of the immigrants did not know much about orthodox Hinduism, even though all Hindus share certain common beliefs and practices. Rapid expansion of the puja market commoditized Hinduism and product differentiation became important as competition among pandits grew. It is the swelling puja market that made the purohita king of Plantation Hinduism and ordinary Hindus the serfs. Hinduism has been converted into a serfdom overseen by wayward lords and we are now extraordinarily dependent upon them (pandits).

Two other structural features are linked to the formidable dependence upon purohitas, which is higher today than a few decades ago (Box 1.1). The first is path dependence. That is, the revealed preference, regardless of how it arose, to preserve the status quo that evolved after the “synthesis.” This may explain why Guyanese Hindus see no valid reason to modify their religious beliefs or the way - the spirit in which - they practice Hinduism. A historical event has frozen our mind to a specific path, which has predisposed us to inertia. We see change to the “religious status quo” as bad and unnecessary. The second feature approaches a paradox: very high literacy rate accompanied by mental paralysis in the domain of Dharma. We are secular wizards but spiritual imbeciles. The steep rise of secular education does not carry over to the neural networks that code for religion. Our “religious” mind is still frozen, stuck in plantation mode even as our secular mind races ahead. Mental paralysis strengthens our dependence upon purohitas, who are always right, not be questioned or challenged but revered. The structural features of Plantation Hinduism have locked us in a vicious circle.

Purohitas have morphed into the bearers and keepers of tradition and authority. They are the only ones endowed with the right to think, which leaves no role for the mind of ordinary Hindus.

#### Box 1.1. Plantation Hinduism: Three structural features

Plantation Hinduism is characterized by structural and substantive features. The former refers to those conditioning factors that hold the substantive features in place. To use an analogy, structural features define the space, the container, in which reside the substantive features. The three structural features of Plantation Hinduism are:

- Heavy dependence upon pandits
- Path dependence; i.e., historical factors determine our beliefs and practices and we are unwilling to recognize and correct shortcomings
- The dumbing of the Hindu mind when it comes to Sanātana Dharma even though we are no different from other people in the secular world

Source: The author.

Unlike the early purohitas who promoted the study of the Śāstras, including skepticism, inquiry and independence of thought, those of today are interested only in keeping their flock dependent and dumb. It is as if they set out to anesthetize the Hindu mind, which leads us to live an unexamined life that is not worth living, as Socrates said at his trial for impiety and for corrupting youths. Religion does something unfathomable to the Guyanese Hindu mind. S/he becomes submissive, pliant, unthinking, and easily manipulated like a child. Like a terminally sick patient who places her faith in the doctor, ordinary Hindus place their faith in the hands of purohitas, some of whom even dole out medical advice to their “patients.” Many of these same Hindu patients are educated, hardworking, greedy, covetous, corrupt and as acquisitive and competitive as any other people in the world. We are capitalists in the world outside of the temple and unthinking supplicants in the temple; servants of money and servants of purohitas. There is no room for character development and spiritual progress. Such is the tragedy of Plantation Hinduism.

The implications of these conditioning factors are grave. Hindus have stopped reading, thinking, reasoning, asking questions, experimenting to verify or falsify spiritual truths. We accept as gospel whatever purohitas say. Halting the quest for truth even before it begins means that Plantation Hinduism does not cater to spirituality, Vedānta or scientific Hinduism (*Rāja vidyā*, the king of all sciences) (Endnote 6). This is contrary to Krishna’s teaching in Bhagavadgītā: “My teaching is both *dharmyam* and *amṛtam*.” *Dharmyam* means that which is inseparable from dharma; it is spiritual teaching that strengthens human bonds and builds society. *Amṛtam* means the quality of being immortal. These two words are repeatedly mentioned in Bhagavadgītā and are combined in the last shloka (30) of Chapter XII to drive home the idea that one goes with the other. These two untranslatable Sanskrit words are generally translated as “nectar of teaching,” which leaves much to be desired. Swami Ranganathananda explains their significance: “One is, work for the stability of the society. Society is to be stable, progressive, in which people are happy. That is called *dharmyam*. That aspect of My teaching which is conducive to social stability, happiness and welfare of all people is called *dharmyam*. And the other is *amṛtam*, ‘it takes you towards the realization of the immortal Atman within you.’ That is *amṛtam*” (Ranganathananda 2000b: Volume 3: 29; see also 2000a: Volume 2: 338). Unlike other religions, Sanatana Dharma is both *dharmyam* and *amṛtam*. Some mystical, other-worldly, religions may stress *amṛtam*; others only the worldly aspect, *dharmyam*. A comprehensive spirituality includes both *dharmyam* and *amṛtam* and both must be pursued simultaneously to create a healthy society that fosters the development of high character and spiritual growth. That combination of the sacred and the secular is the integral philosophy that lies at the heart of Sanatana Dharma.

Plantation Hinduism has no room for *dharmyam*, but there is a little *amṛtam*. The latter fleetingly makes us feel connected to a higher principle but is then forgotten. One without the other is not spirituality; both must be present to make society better and to evolve us into spiritual beings. Those who never care about dharma but repeat Krishna, Krishna, Krishna “are the enemies of Hari. Why? Seeing such ‘devotees’ people run from Hari” (Ranganathananda 2000b: Volume 3: 30). These people are *mūḍhāḥ*, fools (Endnote 7); they cannot understand spirituality and are content with Plantation Hinduism, which we call religion. We cannot understand that one must work selflessly for the world even as one works for spiritual liberation. Spiritual development happens only when *dharmyam* and *amṛtam* go together, which then becomes a complete philosophy of life, one that attends to worldly welfare and spiritual development. Worldly welfare, moral elevation and spiritual growth are all possible through a unifying philosophy, a combination of *dharmyam* and *amṛtam*. Plantation Hinduism cannot, and does not, promote such an integral conception and practice. Like the Semitic religions, Plantation Hinduism has fractured human endeavor into different compartments.

Plantation Hinduism encourages attachment to dogmas, superstitions, the world and the temporary pleasures it offers, rather than liberation from it. We seem to want a religion that is hard to practice, mysterious, un-understandable and with a tendency to make us dumb. This is our idea of religion, which is contrary to Krishna's teaching. Bhagavān says that a mature mind understands and appreciates a path that is *susukham kartum*, easy to practice, very simple. Such a path is also *avyayam*, the fruit is infinite, imperishable. Though simple, such a path "will give a phalam or fruit which is *avyayam* or imperishable" (Bhagavadgītā IX.2; see Ranganathananda 2000b: Volume 2:339). Against this benchmark, Hinduism as practiced by Guyanese Hindus has deviated from Sanātana Dharma, and the descent of spirituality is accompanied by the ascent of materialism, *pari passu*, in equal proportion. The tyranny of tradition, the unquestionable authority of elders, and the lack of a skeptical outlook keep a tight lid on doubts and inquiry and paralyze self-learning and character development and thus spiritual growth. The result is persistent ignorance, unrelenting poverty of the mind, which is at the heart of Plantation Hinduism. The unhappy outcome is that the four objects or goals of life – the four *puruṣārthas* or the Hindu theory of value – have been re-configured, not deliberately but through the sheer force of everyday behavior and attitude. In effect, Guyanese Hindus who subscribe to Plantation Hinduism sidetrack Dharma (law, virtue, righteousness), distort karma and have almost forgotten *mokṣa* (liberation from interminable cycle of birth and death). Most of our thinking, behavior and attitude is motivated by *Kāma* (desire, enjoyment), which may bring *Artha* (wealth), though the means to *Artha* may be unethical and immoral. We forget that if the means are corrupt, so is the end, regardless of how noble the end is. Guyanese Hindus are compromising Dharma, which the foundation for the pursuit of the other three *puruṣārthas*.

### **Plantation Hinduism: Substantive Features**

Major substantive features or elements of the belief system of Plantation Hinduism include degraded *bhakti*, confusing Brahman with Its manifestations, believing man can erase a portion of the fruits of karma, obsession with the external aspects of rituals, entrenched belief in superstitions and a weakened belief in reincarnation (Box 1.2). Overall, the three structural and six substantive features equate Plantation Hinduism to a creed in which dogmas, blind faith, superstitions, luck and ignorance are its central pillars. *Anubhūti* or realization and direct experience (of Ultimate Reality) has no role, annihilated by *mata* (doctrine; faith; belief). True, our version of *bhakti* involves sacrifice (a flower, water, fruit and food, mostly) and worship. But both *bhakti* and rituals are conditional, invariably done for reward, such as guidance, material assistance, wealth, good health, good children, a nice job, and so forth. Our rituals, which are motivated by self-interest, must be conducted by *pandits*, some of whom are attracted to the job because of pecuniary motives (tax free money for transactions are done in cash). It is not unheard of for some of these same *pandits* to sexually assault young females. Since the fulfillment of desires trumps the urge for transcendental experience, *karmaphala*, or the fruits of karma, takes priority over *mokṣa*. This distortion reduces Plantation Hinduism to the pursuit of more mundane things disguised as spirituality.

Conditioning and substantive factors have collectively endowed Plantation Hinduism with other markers, some of which have appeared only in the last several decades. First, the *pagri* (*pagdi*), which resembles a turban. Hindus have been wearing it as a cultural symbol, but there is no scriptural requirement for males to wear a *pagri*. Plantation Hinduism has added its own twist: a *pagri* is worn only by Brahmin *pandits*. It is a symbol of a *pandit's* arrival at the pinnacle of Hinduism: perceived high learning and an object of veneration and even worship. At some functions, especially *yajñas*, one of the *pandits* sits on the *singhasan* to draw attention to his status and prominence. He is perceived as the most learned and holiest of people assembled in the *mandir*, which is also called "*mathiya*" in Guyana, especially up to the time 1990s or so (now some of us use the word "church," which bespeaks of how much we have been influenced by Christian ideas,

### Box 1.2. Plantation Hinduism: Substantive Features

*Degraded version of bhakti:* Bhakti (unfathomable and intoxicating devotion for Divinity) is one of the three paths to liberation; the other two are the path of action and the path of knowledge. Guyanese Hindus, both at home and in the Diaspora, have corrupted bhakti and *Bhakti-marga* by seeing them as prayer (action), consciously or unconsciously, for rewards, for the fulfillment of worldly desires. Degraded bhakti accumulates the fruits of karma for the “devotee of materialism” and therefore perpetuates *samsāra* or the endless cycle of birth and death. Subscribers to Plantation Hinduism believe they are using God as an instrument rather than God using them an instrument

*Confusing Brahman with His manifestation:* Brahman is eternal and all-pervading, all-knowing. He is both immanent in His creations and transcends them; the world is in Him but He is not the world. However, Guyanese Hindus confuse a murti, which is a physical representation of Divinity, with Brahman Himself, who is formless and qualityless, who is infinite, pure, one and non-dual Consciousness. Who is *Sat-chid-ānanda* (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss). We even believe that our illiterate and self-centered pandits can instill life into a murti. The result is idol worship, which leads to the practice of widespread rituals without understanding their significance or proper conduct

*Believing that man can erase the fruits of karma:* In general, Guyanese Hindus believe that karma is destiny, an unalterable life course. Yet we believe, paradoxically, in numerous superstitions, luck and in the stars too. We also believe that *karmaphala* (fruits of karma) or a portion of it can be erased, or at least mitigated, by the occasional puja – a havan, a yajña (jag, which is a communal event), a jandhi, the daily puja at home, a visit to India and/or by attending mandir at least once a week (usually on Sunday)

*Obsession with the external aspects rituals:* Instead of universal and eternal values, external rituals dominate to such an extent that Śruti (experienced truths) has been replaced by Smṛtis (values and traditions, which owe their existence to human authorship). Stultifying traditions have replaced universal, eternal values and “experiment with truth” and the average Guyanese Hindu is unaware of the horse-before-the-cart degrading transformation. Many Guyanese Hindus insist that worship for rewards is an integral part of the Vedas. It is, but not in the way a typical Guyanese Hindu understands it: as ritual commerce between gods and men, with puja as the currency. There is not internal ritual, which is kindled by the fire of spiritual knowledge and into which the senses and their objects are poured and gradually consumed in the fire of self-control (*ātma-samyama-yogāgni*, Bhagavadgītā IV.26). Instead we pour material objects into an external fire in anticipation of a reward.

*Entrenched belief in superstitions:* Superstition is the belief in supernatural causality—that one event causes another without any natural process or explanation linking the two events. We believe in numerous superstitions, some of which trace their origin to the plantations. These include the belief in jumbie (ghosts or bhoot in Hindi), churile, and ole higue

*Half-hearted belief in reincarnation:* We still believe in reincarnation, but this core pillar of Sanātana Dharma is under stress and is giving way to the “one-crop” view of life. Just a few days ago, I heard a relative of mine telling another that “life ga wan crap [crop] only, bhai” – of course, the conversation happened over a run-drinking session. While this particular feature is not yet widespread, it is a move away from belief in *samsāra*, the four *purushartas*, including the ultimate goal of life itself (*mokṣa*).

*Note:* The Sanskrit word “Brahman” cannot be translated as “God,” which equates it to the God of Semitic faiths. The all-pervading, eternal, infinite, one and non-dual pure Consciousness is Brahman, also called Atman. Those are the words used by the Upanishads, but any word can be used. Supreme Reality cannot be described (*neti, neti* – not this, not this) and it does not have a name or form but is inherent in His manifestations and also transcends them. He is everywhere, inside and outside of us and in all beings and things. He is close to us and always accessible at any time. On the other hand, the God of Semitic religions is far away from his creations, somewhere in the unknown out-there, looking down at us but have nothing to do with us. Having created the world and man in an image of Himself (which implies that this God has a form and therefore pure Consciousness), the Semitic God separates Himself from the world and man and leaves man to his own devices. The Semitic God has emotions and can be partial as well as impartial. He can condemn some to eternal damnation and selected others to eternal heaven.

*Source:* The author.

concepts and terminology). What is more, the singhasan pandit is referred to as Vyas Maharaj, the great Ṛṣi, who is the author of the *Brahma-sūtra*, *Mahābhārata*, among other works. Most astonishingly, the “Vyas puja” is in effect worship of the pandit. A second recent marker is the vigorous rise of Brahmanism promoted by pandits. Only a Brāhmaṇa can be a pandit, but the question of what makes a person a Brāhmaṇa is not addressed. A Guyanese Brāhmaṇa is a birth Brāhmaṇa (Brahmin), who remains a Brāhmaṇa regardless of his conduct or morality. Ordinary Guyanese Hindus unquestionably accept this. The pandit’s word is the sacred gospel. Further, Plantation Hinduism has deteriorated to the point where we can no longer tell the difference between a pandit, a guru, a swami or an ācārya. To most of us, they all are the same.

In a double way, Plantation Hinduism is commerce. It is closer to the western idea of religion than to spirituality. Religion is about worldly things, about understanding and benefiting from the manifested universe; spirituality is about turning the gaze inwards to discover the infinite and eternal Atman in oneself and in all beings. First, both bhakti and rituals are petitions to the gods for material abundance and the satisfaction of desires here and hereafter. Second, pandits sell religious

services to their Hindu flock. There is a fee for puja services and even an unwritten price list for such services. For other services, such as the “dead wok,” pandits collect fees as well as an array of stuff and puja accessories, which they sell in their “cake shops” or those of friends and relatives. Yet there is no drought of thoughts of liberation, some *amṛtam*, only that they are quickly forgotten. It is as if Guyanese Hindus prefer temporary happiness derived from material abundance rather than eternal happiness - *sukham āṭyantikam*, infinite or supreme happiness (Bhagavadgītā VI.21). People relate more intimately to what they feel and experience here and now, which is even more pronounced in a world where short-termism (immediate gratification) is the overriding goal. Since reward adds to the stock of karma, the Guyanese Hindus version of bhakti and rituals, mainstays of Plantation Hinduism, further shackle the jīva in samsāra, which only perpetuate suffering. Knowingly or unknowingly, liberation is not the goal of Plantation Hinduism. Consequently, the search for Truth - the Self or Brahman - is largely missing because focus is on the external word, on *aparā vidya*.

The analytical power of the container-contained analogy is exemplified at a higher as well. I refer here the contrasting perspective between Sanatana Dharma and Plantation Hinduism (Box 1.3).

Box 1.3. Sanatana Dharma and Plantation Hinduism		
Feature	Sanatana Dharma	Plantation Hinduism
Container	Body-mind complex	Body-mind complex
Contained	Atman or Self	Ego or lower, little self
Body	Dies and returns to the elements	Dies and returns to the elements
Self	Infinite, eternal, one and non-dual, pure Consciousness. The Self cannot be contained; It is immanent in all manifestations but also transcends them. Bhagavadgītā declares that the Self cannot be cut, wetted or destroyed. Death of the body does not harm or destroys the Self	Absent
Ego	Lower, little self to be conquered through the practice of detachment - the theory of <i>Alepvādam</i> , the theory of non-attachment, non-sticking. This way, one gradually detaches the infinite Self from the body and realizes that the body-mind complex is only an instrument for this purpose. This is the profound Truth, which is infinite, non-dual and eternal. The one pure Consciousness transcends all boundaries and cannot be contained	To be fed and pampered; makes us arrogant, greedy, selfish, unethical. Limited and dies with the body: destruction of body = destruction of little self.  In his <i>Vivekacūḍamaṇi</i> Śaṅkarācārya (shloka 142) says” “As the mass of clouds born out of the sun hides the sun and proclaims itself, so does the ego born out of the infinite Atman hides the Atman and
Rituals	A form of karma. Encouraged but with spirit of detachment; performed as yajna. In fact, it is the inner ritual, rather than the external one, that is emphasized	As commerce, desire-motivated word-ship, between gods and men
Karma	Done with spirit of detachment for the benefit of all; selfless action	Desire-motivated action with attachment to <i>karmaphala</i> (fruits of karma) and agency
Samsāra	Goal of life is not accumulation of karma and reincarnation but <i>mokṣa</i> or liberation from the repeated births and deaths	Accumulation of karma and perpetuation of samsara seems to be the goal of Plantation Hinduism
Essence of religion	<i>Anubhūti</i> or direct experience of truths contained in the Śruti	Belief, dogma, superstitions
In effect, Plantation Hinduism has turned Sanatana Dharma on his head, upside down. Sanatana Dharma is a way of life that stretches from bondage to liberation. We live, practice and breathe it every second of life. On the other hand, Plantation Hinduism is like a Semitic religion: we practice it in the morning and evening at the family altar and by attending mandir on Sunday for a few hours – and all this with the expectation of satisfying a worldly desire. Dominated by the ego, Plantation Hinduism does not foster spirituality in any significant way. Spiritual growth and the development of high character require going beyond the ego, but Plantation Hinduism fosters growth, expansion, of the ego. It is ego-elevating, not ego-annihilation.		
Source: The author		

## Endnotes

1. This article is based on my forthcoming book tentatively titled “*Sanatana Dharma and Plantation Hinduism: Exploration and Reflections of a Guyanese Hindu*,” which is expected to be published later this year.
2. See, for example, Jayawardena 1966.
3. An *Ashrama* (*āśrama*) in Hinduism is one of four age-based life stages discussed in ancient and medieval era Indian texts. The four asramas are: Brahmacharya (student), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (retired) and Sannyasa (renunciation). The Ashramas system is one facet of the concept of Dharma in Hinduism. It is also a component of the ethical theories in Indian philosophy, where it is combined with four proper goals of human life (Purusartha), for fulfillment, happiness and spiritual liberation.
4. In his 1888 book, Bronkhurst (1888: 16-17) observes: “The Sonnites from the larger number among the admirers and followers of Muhammed, ‘the Prophet of the illiterate of the wilds of Arabia. Divided as the Muhammedans are in the Colony, they have erected one or two handsome *musjids*, or *mosques*, in which they carry on their religious services. They have their *Imam*, who reads the prayers; the *Khuteeb*, who preaches the sermon or delivers an oration; and the *Muezzim*, who calls to prayer the ‘faithful.’”
5. “Brahmin” is not a Sanskrit word but a poor English translation of “*Brāhmaṇa*,” one of the four orders (*Varṇa*), of society, which is not a hierarchical stratification of society. A *Brāhmaṇa* is a spiritual and intellectual being endowed with purity, who has understood Reality (Brahman), who fosters spirituality, and who helps others to know Reality.
6. *Vidyā* means knowledge or science and science means verified and verifiable knowledge. Among all the *vidyās*, *Rāja vidyā*, spiritual science, is the king of science (Ranganathananda 2000b: Volume 2: 337).
7. The opposite of *mūḍha*, fool, is *asamūḍhaḥ*, a non-deluded person.

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# Conversion: The Caribbean Challenge In The Next Century

Ramnarine Sahadeo<sup>1</sup>

Despite all the challenges and hardships experiences by the children of Bharat who settled in the Caribbean permanently they have made numerous positive contributions to their adopted countries. However, the struggles continue after 1917 when indentureship ended and beyond Independence.

One of the greatest challenges for the Caribbean Hindu in the next century is how to confront the ubiquitous demon of religious conversion.

Conversion has been quite effective in Guyana, even though it received the largest number of indentured servants. This blasphemy against God and Self followed our ancestors from India to many lands across the *Kala Pani* (black waters) aided overtly and covertly by various religious bodies and government institutions. Of the approximately 240, 000 who landed in Guyana about 90% were Hindus. The 2002 Guyana Census indicates that while East Indians form about 44% of the population only 28% are Hindus. In 2012 this figure was reduced to 25%. Current figures in the Caribbean countries show a constant decline in numbers over the years. Some of the smaller islands have less than one hundred even after taking into consideration recent immigration.

Religious conversion remains one of the greatest threats to Hindu family life and hence *dharmic* culture. Gandhi saw this as an impediment to world peace and an attempt to uproot Hinduism under the cloak of humanitarian work supported by imperialists. He astutely recognised the adverse impact this offensive, nefarious, practice had on family life. He wrote, "In Hindu households, the advent of a missionary has meant the disruption of the family in the wake of change of dress, manners, language, food and drink..." (Harijan, November 5, 1935).

One can get an idea of how long this obnoxious practice has been in existence by the comment of the late Indian President Abdul Kalam. "At one time we were all Hindus".

## **Canadian connections**

The early missionaries who were paid by government to convert Hindus met with little success. From 1856 to 1896 the average annual number was 29 (Basdeo Mangru, *Indians in Guyana*, page 39).

The Canadian Presbyterian Mission established in 1885 reaped more souls because it was seen as an Indian church and accommodated some of the teachings of Hinduism. The damage accelerated when the numerous denominational schools that were part of the Christian churches combined education with Christianity. The teachers were paid by the government but one had to be a Christian to get a teaching or other government job. Some may have looked at this practice as innocent since the choice was just an economic one and many did not take the change seriously. Such a perception fails to observe how the reduction in numbers in educated leadership still have an adverse

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<sup>1</sup>The author, Ramnarine Sahadeo was born in Leguan, Guyana. He has a B.A. from California State University and LL.B. from the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He is a Notary Public, Province of Ontario and practiced Law from 1980 to 2014. He is the author of "Mohandas K. Gandhi: His Thought, Words, Deeds and His Inspiration the Bhagavad Gita.

effect today aside from the obvious destruction of family unity. This may no longer be an overt requirement today but even the practice of saying non-universal prayers in schools and other government offices, still continues, and need constant supervision to ensure compliance.

The Supreme Court of Canada decision on April 15, 2015 involving the City of Saguenay, Quebec (2015 SCC 16) opined that government must be completely neutral in matters of religion or conscience. This case may be used as a guideline, if not a precedent to challenge long established discriminatory practices in other Commonwealth jurisdictions with similar legislation so the facts are summarized here.

Alain Simoneau, an atheist, who attended council meetings, objected to the practice of the recitation of Catholic prayers by the Mayor and Councillors. A sacred heart statue and a crucifix also adorned the walls of council. This he testified, caused him to experience feelings of isolation and exclusion thus violating his rights to freedom of religion and conscience as outlined in both the Quebec Charter and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The court agreed and rejected the argument that prayers were justified on the basis of tradition and that council's attempt at reasonable accommodation by inviting those with objections to leave the chambers during prayers and then re enter, far from tempering the discrimination only exacerbated it. This identifies and stigmatises the non-believer. Canadian Society has given rise to a concept of neutrality, according to which the State must not interfere with religion and beliefs. This requires that the State to neither favor nor hinder any particular belief or non-belief. Canadian Cultural landscape includes many traditional and heritage practices that are religious in nature. Sponsorship of one religious tradition by the State in breach of its duty of neutrality amounts to discrimination against all other such traditions as it creates a distinction, exclusion or preference that has the effect of nullifying or impairing the right to full and equal recognition and exercise of freedom of conscience and religion.

Forced conversion as an international demon must be confronted by courts of competent jurisdiction and hopefully all Western democracies have to remind themselves of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states in part "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..."

It should be emphasized that the person who felt uncomfortable was not an extremist and he was supported by groups and ordinary people who insist on equality rights and hope that the judiciary is bold and independent enough to enforce universally accepted principles.

In the Caribbean the concern about prayers would extend to all governmental institutions including schools.

### ***Education and information***

Hindus in Guyana, Trinidad, and Surinam have generally been able to maintain their culture partly due to their numbers compared to others in the Caribbean. However as their numbers decrease some Caribbean countries are a good reminder of how one of the most ancient culture on earth can disappear. Numbers alone however is not a guarantee that scientific nature based cultures would flourish or even survive. History has not been kind to them as there are examples all over the globe from America to Australia, to South America where entire cultures have been pressured out of existence.

There are many reasons why coerced conversion takes place and hence many approaches will be necessary to stop or reduce this activity. One of the enduring methods is to promote *Dharmic*

knowledge. This means a more active role for the temples, the establishment of private Hindu learning centres, and regular access to or control of the media. Very few temples have a library or a book store and few Hindus can be found reading a book. There is information on the internet but this is no substitute for the pages of a book which can be taken anywhere and which activates the imagination.

Trinidad has numerous Private Hindu schools with a school board. In Guyana, *Saraswati Vidya Niketan* (SVN) a rural private Hindu Secondary school that only started in 2002 has made its supporters within and outside Guyana proud as it has consistently produced academic results better than well established ones. The country needs many similar institutions as *Dharmic* knowledge cannot be left only to priests and temples but must find its way into every classroom from kindergarten to University level.

In neighbouring Surinam, Hindi is spoken in the home and the Hindus own and operate media outlets that are used exclusively for cultural programmes.

It is difficult to identify a greater falsehood that God can only be reached by a certain path, or through one religion, yet this blatant lie threatening hell fire for others has won the support of government for centuries across the globe. It continues to be marketed today despite all the science and evidence that was not available when Constantine converted or when Galileo was declared a heretic and Copernicus was imprisoned for placing the sun and not the earth as the centre of the universe.

Local, regional and even global wars and family conflicts have started from religious differences. World peace is not possible unless there is mutual respect for all religions. Those who wish to convert others should learn from Swami Vivekananda when he stated in 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions that “...holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possession of any church...every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character”. Like Gandhi and numerous religious leaders, they acknowledge that all religions which have produced good people and the easiest path to salvation is through one’s own religion. The Caribbean would be a better place when this axiom is acknowledged and practiced by all peoples and governments. This objective should attract a united effort of Hindus everywhere.



Pujya Swami Aksharananda Ji

*Throughout the colonial period Christianity enjoyed a specially favoured relationship with the state and, together church and state cooperated to reproduce a western European Christian culture in the Caribbean. In this context, indentured Indians and Hindus, introduced in the colonies not only for the fruits of their labour but also for the salvation of their souls, were viewed as outlandish and foreign aberrations, heathen savages, and sinners that needed to be civilized and Christianized. The instrument chosen to effect this higher civilization was, of course, the Christian church.*

— Swami Aksharananda of Guyana, Eminent Hindu Scholar, Founder and Principal of *Saraswati Vidya Niketan* (SVN) High School (*Stabroek News*, Sunday, July 7, 1996)

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# Struggle for Indian Arrival Day in the Caribbean

Vishnu Bisram<sup>1</sup>

This May 2018 marks the 180th anniversary since Indians first came to the Caribbean (British Guiana first colony to receive indentured laborers from India). Indians are found in many Caribbean territories (British, Dutch, French, etc.) and their presence everywhere (especially where they have had cultural freedom) has allowed them to explore and promote their cultural heritage although historically they have been persecuted. The persecution of Indians has fueled an Indian consciousness prompting them to hold on to their culture and their ties to Mother India. In some territories, especially in Guyana, their culture has been marginalized and the Indian presence has been facing serious pressure and challenges for survival. It is noted that even physical survival has been an issue in Guyana with many being robbed and murdered.

The indentured laborers (who came from 1838 to 1917) and their progenitors have made immense contributions to the greater Caribbean region as well as to the countries (Canada, England, USA, etc.) to where they re-migrated. Yet their enormous contributions to the societies where they migrated have not been officially recognized by all of their governments. And when recognition came, governments did so grudgingly or half heartedly. Recognition of their contributions required a lot of goading and arm twisting by the leadership of the Indian community as though such recognition has not been deserved or that Indians don't exist or ought not to exist in the region. Indians in the region have had to struggle for their cultural and physical survival ever since they came in 1838. What Indians in the region (or each territory) have consistently asked for was/is simply recognition as a people and of their distinct cultural identity, that is, the acknowledgement that they exist as a people and that they should be able to freely celebrate their culture and identity and practice their own faith and not be subjects of racism. Recognition is important in their collective history. This article briefly addresses efforts and challenges to commemorate Indian Arrival Day (IAD) in Guyana and Trinidad and the struggle to achieve official recognition (with a holiday or government sponsored activities) of same. Such recognition was geared to salute and honor the hard and sacrifices made by our fore-parents from India who built a rich cultural and disciplined life for us in the Caribbean. The ancestors have handed down a rich treasure of cultural values, traditions, customs, practices, religions, music, and cuisine that have survived in spite of the onslaught from those who seek to exile or liquidate the Indian community.

While government in each territory has not been very supportive of recognizing the sacrifices of the indentureds, private (non government and religious) community based Indian organizations have held annual commemorative celebrations over the last several decades going back to the mid 1900s in each territory to mark the presence of Indians and celebrate their identity (culture) and by extension Indian arrival. These organizations and individuals also celebrate the contributions that the Indian ancestors made to their territories of domicile. As a result of IAD activities, there has been an increase in the grassroots Indian-consciousness movement that allow for Indian cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Vishnu Bisram was born in Guyana. He obtained his PhD from City University of New York. He writes on the Indian diaspora for the mass media and has contributed articles for books. He is a columnist in various Caribbean oriented publications. He also conducts opinion polls. Like several others, he was involved in the struggle for the granting of IAD holiday in Trinidad and Guyana.

retention that was introduced into the territories by the indentured ancestors. Tribute is paid to those who conceived and or assisted in organizing commemorative events (of IAD) marking the presence of Indians in the Caribbean and those (too many to mention here) who also helped to propagate Indian culture in North America and Europe as introduced by the Indo-Caribbean immigrants. Kudos is also paid to those (whose names are many and some of who have migrated to North America and Europe) who participated in the struggle to gain official recognition of IAD in the Caribbean region; they deserve accolades for their hard work in obtaining recognition for IAD and for keeping Indian culture alive. They have also helped to defend the physical survival of Indians. It is noted that in some territories the physical presence of Indians is threatened. They are targeted for violence (as in Guyana) and robberies on account of their ethnicity. Their culture is denigrated and marginalized and not provided much governmental support – certainly not even near the amount of resources being given to Afro creole culture.

It has been a tradition over many decades (in fact since the early 1920s right after indentureship was terminated in 1917) to hold such annual commemorative festivities (cultural variety concerts, seminars, conferences, banquets, and the like) to mark the date Indians first arrived in each territory. It is called Indian Arrival Day (IAD) and it celebrates the presence of and the contributions made by Indians in the region. Such celebrations are held not only in the Caribbean but in the metropolitan cities of North America (New York, Toronto, Orlando, Jersey City, Miami, etc. since the 1980s) and Europe (Amsterdam, Paris, London since the 1970s) to where Indians have migrated from the Caribbean.

Several territories in the region recognize the presence and laud the contributions of the Indians with the celebration of Indian Arrival Day, a date that varies from territory to territory depending on the actual date when Indians first arrived there. This recognition has come about as a result of the work of some dedicated grass roots activists (political, cultural and religious). It has not been an easy journey or task to organize commemorative events marking the Indian presence in the Caribbean and or in North America and Europe. It has been quite a struggle to get the Afro governments of these territories to recognize the presence of Indians with commemorative celebrations. In the Caribbean, in particular, (Black) governments initially have not been supportive of events and refused to give grants to commemorate IAD. But over time, the governments of Guyana and Trinidad gave minimal amounts of funds to host community activities as contrasted with support for Afro festivals or Emancipation Day celebrations. IAD, in Guyana and Trinidad, for example, obtains less than a tenth of the resources committed to Emancipation Day activities. Also, Black governments had adamantly opposed granting a holiday to recognize IAD in contrast with Emancipation Day.

Significant pressure has/had been applied on (African dominated) governments by grass roots (Indian) organizations and community activists to make IAD a national holiday. Some of these commemorative events are “officially” sanctioned by the government as in Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Grenada, St. Vincent, Guadeloupe, Martinique, etc. while others (like Jamaica, St. Lucia, Belize, etc.) are privately carried out by community organizations without government encouragement or support. The PNC government in Guyana (1965 to 1992), for example, viewed by Indians as racist, denigrated Indians. The PNC was/is generally viewed as anti-Indian even by the US government. Whether supported by government or not, almost every territory observes or celebrates Indian Arrival day though not a national holiday. Four governments (Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Grenada) caved in to the unrelenting demand by Indian activists and community based Indian organizations to grant official recognition to IAD; celebrations are held in various parts of these countries on IAD. For Guyana, Indian Arrival is on May 5 and in Trinidad, it is on May 30. Other territories have a different Indian

Arrival Date that varies depending when Indian first arrived there.

Indians in Guyana have had to struggle for recognition and cultural freedom especially during the authoritarian years (1966 thru 1992) of the apartheid like PNC government, a minority ethnic group that ruled a majority Indian race (and other ethnic groups) through electoral frauds. An editorial in Guyana Chronicle a decade ago aptly described the type of government that existed in Guyana under the PNC dictatorship and resulting cultural significance of the restoration of democracy in Guyana that occurred in 1992. The paper stated: “1992 saw the disintegration of a sort of lesser apartheid; a system of cultural governance where the overwhelming bulk of our socio-political and cultural iconography was quite frankly constituted of a supposedly national zeitgeist that was, more than anything else, if not Afro-centric, then Afro-sentimental”.

With the restoration of democracy in 1992 came change not only at the political level but also in the socio-cultural dynamic with Indians re-asserting their cultural identity. However, the Indian based PPP government (1992 thru 2015), the successor to the racist PNC, was not very supportive of Indian culture. In fact, although the PPP needed Indian support to win office, it did not promote Indian culture and has been accused by the leadership of several leading Indian organizations of marginalizing Indian culture. And it took a lot of lobbying and pressure from the Indian community before the PPP government agreed to grant a holiday on the occasion of IAD. This recognition of a holiday came a decade after Trinidad agreed to grant an official holiday for IAD in 1996. And as it was for Guyana, it took a lot of coaxing, lobbying and pressure to get the Trinidad government to agree to a holiday for Indian Arrival. And the holiday came grudgingly being labeled as Arrival Day as opposed to Indian Arrival Day. With pressure and a demand from Indian activists, the Basdeo Pandey Administration changed the title to IAD in 1996. The same ought to be done in Guyana.

We must salute and acknowledge the dedication and hard work of all those who struggled to obtain official recognition of the enormous sacrifices of the Indian ancestors and their progeny. Let us give thanks to those who led the struggle for IAD and it was not those who were the political leaders who led the struggle for IAD.

This is a time for reflection for the Indian community at large of their state of being in the society they live and what measures need to be taken to improve their well being and protect their culture and physical survival.



**Ms Ryhaan Shah**

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*I would never negate my Indian self. It is my DNA. It is my history, my legacy, my traditions, my culture. It is my spiritual home. If I ever denied any of it, that would be the real dishonour. And if anyone asked that of me they would be trampling on my guaranteed human, spiritual and constitutional rights.*

—Ryhaan Shah, *Kaieteur News*, May 6, 2015

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